

Essay

A Dialogue on the Constructions of GLBT and Queer Ethos: “I Belong to a Culture That Includes . . . ”

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Abstract: Invoking a dialogue between two scholars, authors Jane Hoogestraat and Hillery Glasby discuss the exigence for, construction of, and differentiation between LGBT and queer ethos. Drawing from Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* and the construction of a gay identity, the text explores connections between queer theory, LGBT(Q) ethos, and queer futurity, ultimately arguing for a more nuanced and critical understanding of the undecidability and performativity of LGBT and queer ethos. In framing LGBT and queer ethos as being at the same time a self and socially constructed and mediated—legitimate and illegitimate—ethos can be understood not only as a site for rhetorical agency, but also as an orientation and a form of activism. Finally, the text offers a case study of Adrienne Rich’s “Yom Kippur,” which is a poem that offers a queer (and) Jewish perspective on identity—from an individual and community level—exhibiting both an LGBT and queer ethos.

Keywords: GLBT/LGBTQ; queer; ethos; normativity; homonormativity; polemic; futurity; undecidability; re/disorientation; legitimacy; rhetorical agency; outness

I belong to a culture that includes Proust, Henry James, Tchaikovsky, Cole Porter, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Christopher Marlowe, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Tennessee Williams, Byron, E.M. Forster, Lorca, Auden, Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Harry Stack Sullivan, John Maynard Keynes, Dag Hammarskjold [. . .] These are not invisible men [. . .] The only way we’ll have real pride is when we demand recognition of a culture that isn’t just sexual. It’s all there—all through history we’ve been there; but we have to claim it, and identify who was in it, and articulate what’s in our minds and hearts and all our creative contributions to this earth [. . .] Why couldn’t you and I [. . .] have been leaders in creating a new definition of what it means to be gay? Larry Kramer (1985, p. 114)

[Jane Hoogestraat] The opening epigraph from Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* (1985) introduces a number of threads that will motivate a discussion of the constructions of GLBTQ ethos. First, Kramer notes with pride the contribution that gay men have made to culture, especially literary culture, from ancient times to the present. Doing so both legitimizes the existence of individual gay people in the present and argues for an ongoing and collective need to continue to redefine both individual and collective gay identities into the future. Using my own literary field of poetry as an example, Kramer’s catalogue might be amended to read “a culture that includes Sappho, Gertrude Stein, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Jane Miller, Kay Ryan, Gloria Anzaldua . . . ”

1. A Re/Disorientation: On How to Read the Text

To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things. Sara Ahmed (2006, p. 565)

The term 'queer' is used in a deliberately capacious way [. . .] in order to suggest how many ways people can find themselves at odds with straight culture. Michael Warner (1999, p. 38)

[Hillary Glasby] The editors of this collection on ethos asked me to review Larry Kramer's draft, originally submitted to offer insight into GLBT ethos, to provide perspective and to address revision, since she is unable to do so herself.¹ However, I felt icky about it; she's left the physical world and I did not want to rewrite or co-opt any of her work, to honor the draft and her as a scholar and colleague-of-colleagues (although I have done minor sentence-level text editing to clarify her original draft, I have not altered or revised any of her ideas or arguments). I have never had the privilege of meeting Jane, besides through this draft, so I want to preserve it, her voice, and her perspective. At the same time, I also feel compelled, as I read, to speak with, alongside, and back to her ideas about GLBT ethos. I am a queer femme lesbian, and here I enact and perform a *queer ethos* by speaking openly and directly, writing alongside her text in an attempt to start a dialogue with—and offer a queer perspective to—Hoogestraat's ideas. Moving between a back-and-forth dialogue and in-text interjections, I hope to expand her work on GLBT ethos and articulate my own understanding of queer ethos. Although she cannot comment directly back to create an ongoing dialogue, I do hope these two perspectives—put in dialogue together—inspire further conversation surrounding LGBT and queer ethos among our readers.

2. Naming Our Culture: GLBT, LGBT(Q), Queer

[JH] With awareness of the risks involved, I will provisionally and temporarily use the term “gay” as an umbrella term that includes all of the following: gay men and lesbian women, all people who identify under the acronym LGBTQ (and variations on the acronym), and all people who identify under the heading “queer”.

[HG] Even with this caveat, I would differentiate a *queer ethos* from, or in addition to, an LGBT(Q) ethos (Hoogestraat has chosen to use the acronym GLBT, and I choose to use LGBTQ to first name the often-erased lesbian identity in favor of the more historically privileged gay identity). Queer seems to be a better collapsed term than gay, because it is separate from gay men (who have long been privileged and even oppressive in the LGBTQ community, as they have historically benefitted from their gender, whiteness, socioeconomic class, ability, etc., despite their sexuality); it is more plural and intersectional; and it reflects the reclamation project that a queer ethos undertakes. Historically, “gay” has been a more palatable term and sexual identity. The word queer carries much more power, because it hasn't been normalized and publicly accepted to the same extent as gay. Queer doesn't feel comfortable or organic to heteronormative mouths. It offers discomfort, confusion, and begs a reorientation to a pejorative-turned-reclamation-project, so a history of oppression and discrimination is always already embedded in its utterance. Queer does not seek legitimization and sees acceptance as a homonormative move. A queer ethos asks who does the legitimizing and interrogates why there is a need for legitimization in the first place. Queer(ness) undercuts the need for legitimacy and even laughs in its face.

[JH] In the following text, I provide an overview of key concepts, terms, and theorists / theories relevant to the ongoing work of constructing plural forms of gay ethos. Throughout, I will be focusing on the plural, provisional, and future-looking quality of this work, and again (in this emphasis on futurity) I find an echo from *The Normal Heart*. At the end of the speech quoted above, Kramer's character Ned Weeks appears to acknowledge simultaneously both failure (in the midst of the AIDS epidemic in 1985) and a look forward: “Why couldn't you and I [. . .] have been leaders in creating a new definition of what it means to be gay?” (Kramer 1985, p. 115). While Kramer's character believes that he has failed, Kramer the playwright and activist did, as I will argue later in the essay, succeed in

¹ Dr. Jane Hoogestraat passed away on 12 September 2015.

a limited but important way in insisting on a new definition of what it means to be gay, producing an extremely polemical ethos that remains one option in a field that now allows for a much broader range of expression than anyone in 1985 might have foreseen. I will explore what happened to that range of expression by focusing specifically on the work of the following theorists: Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, and David Halperin.

[HG] Larry Kramer: resister, AIDS activist, playwright, journalist, and co-founder of both the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). As Erin [Rand \(2008\)](#) explains, "this activism [including Lesbian Avengers and Sex Panic!] was intended not merely to promote acceptance or tolerance, but also to reclaim loudly and forcefully the rights to safety and humanity, and to forge identity and end victimization through self defense". Kramer occupies an interesting space in LGBTQ history: at once cast as an angry AIDS activist as well as a gay conservative who decried "irresponsible" gay sexual behavior and promiscuity. Considered controversial and problematic from both outside and inside the LGBTQ community, Kramer remains an important part of gay history and culture, and has played a significant role in humanizing people living with HIV, although he contributed to splintering within the community even as he called it out.

Rhetorically speaking, Larry Kramer is best known for his use of the polemic in his speeches and writing. Usually defined as a controversial and antagonistic verbal attack, [Rand \(2008\)](#) recasts the polemic as a genre that enables agency, not through the text or speaker, but rather through the form's effect, affect, and subsequent action. She explains, "as a rhetorical form that reveals the general economy of undecidability from which agency emerges, then, the polemic is productively excessive and provocatively queer" ([Rand 2008](#), p. 298).

Here is where my recasting of Hoogestraat's essay on LGBTQ ethos comes into play; the LGBTQ ethos she describes leans toward normative and palatable versions of queerness. In fact, as I addressed above, she goes as far as collapsing queer(ness) into the category of gay despite the power and discomfort the word queer evokes. For this reason, I suggest a queer ethos, one that is provocative and resistant, seeking no legitimization with skeptical yet hopeful regards for futurity.

Queer is polemical; gay not as much, and not necessarily. [Similar to] Kramer, the gay men Hoogestraat refers to are limited to mostly middle to upper class, educated, white gay men, [who are] often the first voices to be heard from the LGBTQ community even though lesbians, queer women of color, and the trans community (especially trans women of color) have laid some of the most compelling groundwork for a revolution of ethos and visibility.

In terms of what Hoogestraat calls the "future-looking quality of his [Kramer's] work," there is much discussion from queer theorists about what role futurity plays in and beyond queer theory. Theorists such as Lee [Edelman \(2004\)](#) resist and reject futurity because of its ties to happiness, success, production, and (reproductive) procreation. Others, such as [Ahmed \(2006\)](#) and José Esteban [Muñoz \(2009\)](#), see hope and possibility in the future. For Edelman, the future—of the earth, humanity, etc.—is tied to the child, a representation of a distanced future rather than the here and now where already-born people suffer and face injustice. In opposition, queer invokes a death drive, which "names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (p. 9). The goal is to let go of the pressure of positivity, to embrace the negative, and embrace *jouissance*—the pleasure of the moment.

On the other hand, [Ahmed \(2006\)](#) explains,

I would not argue that queer has 'no future' as Edelman suggests—though I understand and appreciate this impulse to 'give' the future to those who demand to inherit the earth, rather than aiming for a share in this inheritance. Instead, a queer politics would have hope, not even by having hope in the future (under the sentimental sign of the 'not yet'), but because the lines that accumulate through repeated gestures, the lines that gather on skin, already taking surprising forms. We have hope because what is behind us is also what allows other ways of gathering time and space, of making lines that do not reproduce what we follow, but instead create new textures on the ground. (p. 570)

In this way, futures are most always connected to, understood through, or are created in response to the past, our histories. Rather than reproduce or replicate existing lines, lives, and structures, hope allows for new lines to be forged.

For Muñoz (2009), “queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality [. . .] The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (p. 1). Whereas Edelman (2004) sees queerness as here and now, negative, and antithetical to the child of/as the future, Muñoz sees queerness as only possible in the realm of the future: a process and utopic destination. Muñoz argues, “the here and now is simply not enough. Queerness should and could be about desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough” (p. 96). Queerness is the hope of something better, something fluid and altogether different; queerness is a potentiality.

Queerness cannot ignore futurity. However, what is to be said of an ethos that cares not for the future?

[JH] Having collapsed above (for purposes of economy) the terms “gay” and “queer”, I remain acutely conscious that any definition of ethos in the present must confront the dual legacies of post-modernism and queer theory, both of which radically call into question any notion of a stable individual self, or even of unmediated individual subjectivity. Writing generally of ethos in the era of post-structuralism and beyond, James S. Baumlin (1994) notes: “Post-modernism, which we can partially describe as an attempt to develop post-Cartesian thought, might very well be redefined as an age *after* ethos, since the very notion of the sovereign individual now falls under question” (p. xxi). In general, the field of queer theory argues against any notion of a fixed or essential identity, one that might position an individual as possessing a core self prior to language or prior to the strictures of culture and society. The term “queer” appropriates what was historically deployed as a derogatory term, a term of hate speech if you will, reconstituting the term as productive and having a positive valence.

[HG] Here, I ask readers to interrogate this lean toward productivity and positivity based on Edelman’s (2004) above points, his critiques of procreation, as well as rhetoric and composition’s obsession with products/production, which Jonathan Alexander and Jackie Rhodes (“Queer” 2011) also address. At times, queer can be too productive, excessive, and even cannibalistic in that it subsumes so much in its orbit. One might even say queer(ness) is one of the most elastic categories to date, which doesn’t come without problematic applications . . . problems . . .

[JH] In *Thinking Queerly: Race, Sex, Gender, and the Ethics of Identity*, David Ross Fryer (2010) offers a lengthy definition of the word “queer”, most of which I will quote not because I think his presentation is entirely fair, but because it will serve to introduce current issues in queer theory that do impinge on an understanding of ethos:

first, *queer* is used as an umbrella term, an overarching way of bringing LGBTI identities under one name, both to avoid the awkwardness of alphabet soup and to offer a display of solidarity among the disparate communities the term tries to cover. Second, *queer studies* is used as a challenge to the focus on sexuality implicit in the term lesbian and gay studies [...]. Third, queerness is seen as an alternative to the conservative (read: normative) aspirations of many lesbian and gay liberation movements, movements that a) base themselves on the existence of an essence and inner identity that determines their members, and b) work toward inclusion within the accepted norms of society by claiming that gay men and lesbians aren’t a danger because they hold the same values as normative society does. (p. 15)

[HG] The assertions that (1) gay men and lesbians aren’t a danger and (2) “*because they hold the same values as normative society does*” are problematic for a queer ethos in that they are homonormative. When LGBTQ people assert their sameness to heterosexuals, they silence and elide very stark differences—not just in sexual orientation but also in experiences, rights, and treatment as second-class citizens. Rather than embracing and achieving normativity, queer(ness) rallies against

acceptance, particularly acceptance based on presenting the LGBTQ self as “the same as” straight people. In *The Trouble With Normal*, Warner (1999) describes this as a misstep in thinking that promotes assimilation, “like most stigmatized groups, gays and lesbians were always tempted to believe that the way to overcome stigma was to win acceptance by the dominant culture rather than to change the self-understanding of that culture” (p. 50). Rather than aligning with the status quo, we must push back against it and deflate its power.

[JH] Fryer (2010) rightly understands that there is a gulf between the language and rhetorical aims of, on the one hand, queer theorists, and, on the other hand, gay and lesbian activists. Kramer, for example, would probably not have much patience with the complex and nuanced work being done over issues of non-sovereignty and dispossession in queer theory. Queer theorists would notice (wisely) that the Kramer epigraph to this essay contains an ahistorical representation of gay identity across widely disparate cultures, times, and conditions. While I will finally be arguing that insights from queer theory have everything to do with the construction of ethos (with the construction of livable albeit provisional selves and futures), I want to do so without leapfrogging over what may be at stake in qualifying the use of queer as it is currently deployed theoretically.

In “‘There is no Gomorrah’: Narrative Ethics in Feminist and Queer Theory,” Lynne Huffer (2001) notes that queer theory remains haunted by what I will term a trace of the ethical self: “the spectre of the ethical subject—who both marks and occludes the epistemological and ontological claims of postmodernism” (p. 9). Huffer notes that often “‘queer’ and [. . .] ‘undecidable’ have become virtually synonymous” (p. 15), [which is] a point echoed throughout queer theory. There are at least two problems with collapsing queer into undecidability, the first of which, as Huffer notes, is that “that this is a *specifically queer theoretical* claim that, for the most part, is *not* borne out in the lives of people who, whether they identify as queer or not, are continually interpellated by ideological apparatuses whose stable and oppressive referential content is all too clear” (p. 15). To cite examples that Huffer does not use, when a person on the street is assaulted by the term “queer” yelled from a passing car, the psychic and bodily threat entailed is not undecidable. And when people are denied membership in religious bodies by claims that their conduct and very being is sinful, predatory, and against the laws of god and nature—again, the psychic impact on individuals is not undecidable, nor are the intended consequences of such institutional decision-making undecidable. There is a risk, then, that equating “queer” with “undecidable” will harm some of the very human subjects that queer theory might seek to liberate. In a related fashion, Carla Freccero (2011) suggests that “queer” should also perhaps not be so variously applied as a term that it becomes empty of all charged content. With considerable politeness, Freccero argues: “If in a given analysis, queer does not intersect with, touch, or list in the direction of sex—the catchall word that here refers to gender, desire, sexuality, and perhaps anatomy—it may be that queer is not the conceptual analytic most useful to what is being described” (p. 22).

[HG] Freccero (2011) warns against the problematic results of queer’s elasticity and mis/reappropriation by both queer identified and straight individuals. When queerness is distanced from queer bodies, identities, and lives, the decidability Hoogstraet speaks of is put at risk. I would agree; “queer” has become so on-trend, both in and outside the field of rhetoric and composition, that I fear there is a chance it will become too far removed from its home base—actual, material LGBTQ bodies that suffer oppression (for example, we’ve seen the term “intersectionality” coopted so often that it risks becoming too far distanced from the women of color it was intended to represent and make complex and visible).

3. Queer Theory and the Construction of Ethos

[JH] The above qualifiers notwithstanding, I argue that the work of three leading queer theorists—Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, and David Halperin—is absolutely crucial to an understanding of the creations of normative and non-normative ethos in the present. Throughout her career, beginning with *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990), Butler has argued that gender is in large part performative rather than given, constructed rather than essential, and, I argue, requiring a self-aware and performative

ethos. In *Dispossession* (Butler and Athanasiou 2013), Butler and Athena Athanasiou again discusses the inherent instability of the “‘internal essence’ of gender, something that is everywhere affirmed in popular and medical discourses, but proves to be, within those very same discourses, less stable and sure than it is supposed to be” (p. 129). In empirical terms, no one yet knows if there will be a gay gene, or a combination of gay genes; or a discovery in neuroscience that brains and bodies are hardwired for one identity over others. We are beginning to understand as a culture that being gay or lesbian or any of the varieties of queer is neither pathological nor the result of trauma or lack in infancy or childhood. [However], it is not currently possible to make arguments in favor of love and justice that have absolute roots in biological essence, and it is quite likely that such arguments will never be possible.

[HG] Or necessary or ethical.

[JH] For all the instability that may surround gender and sexuality, and for all of Butler’s focus on the performative nature of gender and sexuality, there is another register available here, beginning early in Butler’s work and continuing late where she writes powerfully about the role of the psyche and sexuality. To my mind, Butler’s clearest formulation on sexuality appears in *Bodies That Matter* (Butler 1993):

Sexuality cannot be summarily made or unmade, and it would be a mistake to associate ‘constructivism’ with ‘the freedom of a subject to form her/his sexuality as s/he pleases’. A construction is, after all, not the same as an artifice [. . .]. In the domain of sexuality, these constraints [on the formation of sexuality] include the radical unthinkability of desiring otherwise, the radical unendurability of desiring otherwise, the absence of certain desires, [and] the repetitive compulsion of others. (p. 94)

For the individual subject, the force of psychic and sexual drives may manifest as being given and intractable, so much so that the subject is likely to assert the existence of a soul, or a core self, or a pre-consciousness arrangement—a claim that “surely not all identity is constructed”. In the *Psychic Life of Power* (Butler 1997), Butler acknowledges as much, again privileging the level of the psyche: “Clearly there are workings of gender that do not ‘show’ in what is performed as gender, and to reduce the psychic workings of gender to the literal performance of gender would be a mistake” (p. 144).

Butler’s recent work (in *Dispossession* [2013]) suggests a manner in which gay ethos (my use of the term, not hers) might be created, partly in reaction to regulatory discourse (again my term). Following Michel Foucault, Butler analyzes how “self-care and self-crafting are in some ways modes of poiesis” (p. 69). In a classical sense, “poiesis” refers to that which “‘produces or leads a thing into being” (Whitehead 2003, n.p.). Butler continues:

This opens the question of what the material is on which or which with such poiesis works. On the one hand, it is, as he [Foucault] claims, the body. But on the other hand, it is clearly those regulatory, if not disciplinary, norms that enter into the subject-formation prior to any question of reflexivity. In some ways, we are talking about how a self struggles with and against the norms through which it is formed, and so we are perhaps tracing how a certain forming of the formed takes place. (p. 69)

[HG] In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Ahmed frames this forming as a(n) re/orientation, “an approach to how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, which are available on the bodily horizon” (p. 543). She continues, “phenomenology helps us explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures” (p. 552). First, through heteronormativity and the insecurity of heterosexuality, we become oriented toward the normative, constantly disciplined by others and ourselves. Yet, when we experience non-normative desire, we become (re)oriented toward something else, something we have been taught repeatedly to move away from rather than toward. As we embrace the re/orientation, we become misaligned with normative sexualities, desires, and identities: “lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion,

are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition" (Ahmed *Queer*, p. 555). In deviating from the straight(ening) lines set out for us, we become deviant(s), "slanted", *out of line*. Therefore, a queer ethos is always already focused on how the subject has been created and cast(e) over time, as deviant and deviating, working to both reveal and undermine [the] restrictive forces that legitimize some subjects and erase or silence others.

[JH] In a sense, the construction of a gay ethos requires a particular attention to craft, but again in the classical sense of a poesis that both produces and reveals. The creation of ethos in this case involves a subject becoming aware of ways, often negative, in which the subject has already been produced through cultural norms and pressures. Butler and Athanasiou (2013) thus explain the problematic role of the "I" found in such self-creating: "So much depends on how we understand the 'I' who crafts herself, since it will not be a fully agentic subject who initiates that crafting. It will be an 'I' who is already crafted, but also who is compelled to craft against her crafted condition" (*Dispossession* p. 70). The tension, then, between what is "given" and what is "made" both structures and animates the construction of individual ethos. Along similar lines, in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014), Berlant advocates the "project of imagining how to detach from lives that don't work and from worlds that negate the subjects that produce them" (p. 5).

For the constructions of gay ethos, a number of features emerge to complicate this process of a self-crafting, including a long-standing tradition, which is only recently starting to be remedied, that (1) either denies the possibility of a gay subject position altogether, or that (2) demonizes such a subject position in relentlessly negative terms. These denials and negations form part of the discursive construction of the gay psyche, existing prior to the emergence of individual agency or the expression of selfhood, and their existence complicates gay identity formation in even the most progressive of environments. To return for a moment to the denial of the gay subject position, Butler (1993) notes: "To the extent that homosexual attachments remain unacknowledged within normative heterosexuality, they are not merely constituted as desires that emerge and subsequently become prohibited. Rather, these are desires that are proscribed from the start" (*Bodies That Matter* p. 236). Similarly, in *Saint Foucault* (1995), Halperin argues the need to "shift homosexuality from the position of an object of power/knowledge to a position of legitimate subjective agency—from the status of that which is spoken while remaining silent to the status of that which speaks" (p. 57).

[HG] What does it mean to be legitimate? *Legitimized?* As Alexander and Rhodes (*Queered* 2012) explain, "Now that the homosexual is a much more visible subject, one who is, at times, allowed to speak, then what kind of ethos is that queer allowed? We all know the 'acceptable' queer, the 'right kind' of gay and lesbian: the f****ts and dykes that keep to themselves, that don't throw it in other people's faces, that want to be married and serve in the military—discreetly. The assimilated queer—the queer who is not queer—is the good queer." In their estimation, queer does not seek to be legitimized while also remaining aware of the compulsion toward the legitimate.

Herein lies the issue with gay versus queer ethos, the ethos of the good gay versus the ethos of the bad queer. In a homonormative view, the non-normative subject shows itself to be less deviant than anticipated, not a social or sexual threat, palatable, acceptable. Here, non-hetero relationships repeat the norms and conventions of hetero relationships: morality, monogamy, marriage, procreation, capitalism and consumerism, citizenship and love of country. It is important to acknowledge if the desire of the rhetor is to appeal to a LGBTQ or non-LGBTQ audience, for what is valued is different, and whether or not the rhetor desires and/or values legitimization. Also, depending on the rhetor and audience, it must be remembered that a sexuality-based ethos could texture or enrich, run alongside, or even up against another identity-based ethos, in terms of race, ability, class, education, religion, etc.

For example, in *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities*, Audre Lorde (1985) connects with her audience of black women through race and feminism, but her ethos doesn't stop there, since she is also a lesbian. As she draws on feminist and black ethos, she simultaneously establishes a sexuality-based ethos, knowing that her audience needs some convincing. She explains, "It is not

easy for me to speak here with you as a black lesbian feminist recognizing that some of the ways in which I identify myself make it difficult for you to hear me. But meeting across difference always requires mutual stretching and until you *can* hear me as a black lesbian feminist, our strengths will not be truly available to each other as black women” (p. 3). In an attempt to interrogate and confront the homophobia within black feminist communities, Lorde draws on racism’s history, comparing being black and being lesbian, both—separately, perceived as “NOT NORMAL” (p. 4). She concludes her call, “I do not want to be tolerated, nor misnamed. I want to be recognized. I am a black lesbian, and I *am* your sister” (Lorde p. 8). Lorde expresses a desire to be recognized, validated, legitimized. At the same time, she boldly claims the very sisterhood she knows is being called into question. She seeks recognition as a lesbian while also critiquing and confronting the very system of power that discredits that sexuality. In the same way, queer does not set a guideline that one can or cannot value or seek legitimization; rather, queer examines the process and effects of legitimization and those who do the legitimizing. Recognition requires visibility, acknowledgement, and understanding of someone as they are, whereas acceptance often implies assimilation, compromise, or—according to The New Oxford American Dictionary—a “willingness to tolerate”.

[JH] Since in the United States, both the news media and the popular entertainment industry have, for at least two decades now, allowed gay discourse to circulate so widely, it is easy to lose track of how both how recent this shift toward a positive language toward gay people has been, and also to gloss over how much demonization still permeates cultural discourses. Even progressive people who consider themselves perfectly comfortable with gay people and with the language of equality often do not realize, for example, that no federal law protects gay people from discrimination in employment. Nor do they necessarily realize that gay sex was decriminalized in a number of states only with the Supreme Court decision of *Lawrence versus Texas* in 2003, or that the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality as a disorder (and hence as pathological) only in 1973. At this writing (August 2014), 19 states allow gay marriage and 31 states do not.

[HG] My partner and I were *unmarried* June 2014. At the time, it was not *allowed*. In fact, in Michigan, it was actually two-times illegal: gay marriage was not legal, and it was also illegal for us to file for a marriage license. At this writing (October 2018), things have changed somewhat; the Supreme Court case *Obergefell versus Hodges* led to all 50 states extending marriage to same-sex couples. However, there are still attacks on LGBTQ rights (adoption bans, Muslim bans, Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE] raids, trans military bans, and denials of visibility and removals of federal protections for trans individuals).

[JH] In August 2014, in 12 of the states that ban gay marriage, that ban has been overruled by either the state or federal court, but it is up for appeal. It is also not clear how the Supreme Court will rule on the matter once a case comes before the Court. I include this litany only to provide evidence of how on the most literal, regulatory level the language circulating around gay people continues to have a very recent history in the negative. The gay crafting of a self or an ethos also continues to be complicated by the circulation of institutional religious rhetoric that, to cite two major examples, considers gay people to be inherently disordered (the position of the Roman Catholic Church) or in violation of Biblical principles (the position on the Southern Baptist Convention, which is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.) Neither institution allows self-professing gay people to become members.

Often, although not always from religious motivation, gay people are also specifically singled out as being a threat to the existing natural order or the promise of the “good life”. In her dialogue with [Berlant and Edelman \(2013\)](#) notes the excess of this scapegoating when she argues the need to:

engage critically the ways that heteronormativity attempts to snuff out libidinal unruliness by projecting evidence of it onto what Rubin calls ‘sexual outlaws’ and other populations that are deemed excessively appetitive, casting them as exemplary moral and political threats that must be framed, shamed, monitored, and vanquished if the conventional good life, with its ‘productive’ appetites, is going to endure [Rubin 2011, p. 131]. (*Sex, or the Unbearable* pp. 4–5)

For Berlant, and as we shall see for Halperin and others as well, any attempt to construct a gay ethos must begin with a deconstruction of what has often gone wrong with the construction of identity in general.

[HG] Warner (1999) also discusses the shame and stigma of sexuality and the conflation of moralism and morality, which results in “moral panic”, the harsh regulation and judgment of people who engage in non-normative sexual desires and practices because they are seen as a threat. He explains, “sexual shame is not just a fact of life; it is also political [. . .] when a given sexual norm has such deep layers of sediment, or blankets enough territory to seem universal, the effort of wriggling out from under it can be enormous” (pp. 3, 6). In a breakaway move from sexual prohibition and repression, Warner argues for sexual autonomy and sexual dignity, “making room for new freedoms, new identities, [and] new bodies” (p. 12).

[JH] Berlant (2011) discusses, from a pedagogical standpoint, the difficulty of encouraging others to see their own identities as constructed, [and] the perceived threat entailed: “It was hard to talk about the wildness of affect and the conventionality of emotions without stepping on people’s attachment to their emotional authenticity, since performing and being recognized as emotionally authentic is just as important to the modern sense of being someone as understanding one’s sexual identity is” (“Starved”, p. 82). An interesting opposition emerges here with the assumption that recognizing the “conventionality of emotions” involves relinquishing an individual subject’s claim to “emotional authenticity”, presumably with conventionality being somehow false as opposed to the truth of authenticity. Halperin (2014) explains that to argue the social constructionist nature of the world, the conventionality of it, if you will, is not to argue that an individual experience of the world, including the intuitive and other deeply felt affects and emotions, is not to argue that these features of experience are false:

Social constructions are not false [. . .] and it is mistaken to regard social analysis as implying that our fundamental intuitions about the world are erroneous or groundless. On the contrary, they are very well grounded—it’s just that they are grounded in our social existence, not in the nature of things. To search for the social grounds of subjectivity is therefore not to invalidate people’s deepest feelings and intuitions or to reduce them to the status of mere illusions or delusions. It is, quite simply, to explain them. (*How to Be Gay* p. 327)

Halperin’s emphasis on “social existence” is important here because, again from a pedagogical standpoint, it is easy to hear “social construction” in such a way to interpret “construction” (wrongly) as false, and to repress entirely the preceding “social”.

Whatever else may be involved in the constructions of gay ethos, the work that emerges becomes intelligible only in the context of *communitas*, in the context of the social or the community. However, that precondition of the social, called for as we shall see by a number of theorists, makes for some awfully hard work whose rewards are not always apparent. With an admitted air of weariness, Berlant (2011) notes: “Perhaps it’s that there is no *emotional* habitus for being queer and that building a world for it, being collaborative, is a lot harder than not bothering” (“Starved” p. 79). Also, calling, as Fryer (2010) does for a reformulation of identities is also not a very cheerful way in which to proceed: “To think queerly is to recognize that most of us occupy identities in bad faith and to consciously choose not to do so ourselves. Queer thinking is critical thinking through and through” (p. 6). While it is hardly consoling to be told that one, probably, occupies identities in bad faith, Fryer’s elaboration of the stakes makes it sound a little better: “In these ways, queer thinking and this definition of the term *queer*, means refusing to be what others tell us to be simply because they tell us to be that way [. . .] Queer thinking also means refusing to accept who we think we are without having interrogated it simply because it seems natural to us” (p. 6).

[HG] In relation to the community and/or the social, I think this is where gay ethos diverges a bit from a (politically) queer ethos: a gay ethos might be concerned with a non-LGBTQ audience (thus looking for approval and to establish themselves as “normal” or “safe” or “the same”) whereas a queer

ethos cares not about appearing or being normal, but rather about being engaged in critically analyzing the importance of normality and investigating and dismantling the notion of the normative.

In addition to being deviant, a queer ethos is *defiant*, negative, and interested in—and open to—failure. Drawing from Jack Halberstam's (2011) ideas about queer antisociality and failure, Mari Ruti (2017) describes the negativity associated with *opting out of* a hetero-based model of happiness. She explains how queers might blame themselves when they fail to achieve normative notions of happiness rather than finding fault in the flawed construction of happiness. In this vein, I'm intrigued by what it might mean to consciously and intentionally occupy identities in bad faith, whether from Halberstam's sense of queer failure and through an embrace of the queer sex(uality) and "bottom of the barrel" identities Warner (1999) advocates for in *The Trouble with Normal*.

[JH] Paradoxically, perhaps, it is in the context of the social, of competing discourses of the social, that the possibility of agency necessary for the creations of gay ethos emerges, and again pedagogy emerges as a thread at this point. In *Sexuality and the Politics of Ethos in the Writing Classroom* (Gonçalves 2005), Zan Meyer Gonçalves notes that competing discourse constructions might actually function to make some level of individual agency plausible: "though we cannot get outside of or avoid the situation of being constructed by discourses, the multiple and competing nature of these discourses creates spaces to develop an awareness, a critical perspective, that in turn makes room for individual rhetors to make some choices and thus exert agency" (p. 10). I would add to analysis that inevitably, this sorting out of competing discourses must take place in the context of *communitas*, in the context of the social. Writing about cross-cultural issues, Davis and Gross (1994) make a similar claim: "Recent cultural criticism, however, has begun to recast the concept of the personal agent into something more again to the ancient Greek sense of *ethos* as 'habit', that is, as a pattern of social practice inseparable from social relations". This shift to the social entails "a fundamentally ethical relation to society, a conception of *ethos* that foregrounds the radically constitutive nature of the social relations and precludes the Enlightenment view of the great isolated individual" or autonomous self (p. 65). I would also add, however, that while language (discourse) possesses tremendous power (more power than any of us can be aware of) both on the rational level and on the level of affect, language itself possess neither agency nor decision-making power. To argue that ethos itself is a social construction should prevent us from viewing it as natural, given, or (in any of its local or specific manifestations) supremely powerful. It is instead to open up ethos (social habit, social discourse) to further questioning. Finally, in terms of constructing a "gay ethos", it is important to understand that while language is constitutive, it need not be monolithic; the language that individuals within communities use to express or construct a gay ethos will inevitably be the language of a subculture, adjacent to a more dominant language but also, at times, subversive of that language.

[HG] What if ethos, like queerness, is also framed as an orientation and more internally driven/based rather than externally driven/based? Although Gonçalves' book is groundbreaking in the field of rhetoric and composition, offering incredible insight about how LGBTQ students and their (mostly straight) audiences are positively impacted through the Speakers Bureau—an on-campus organization where LGBTQ students share their stories to build empathy and understanding—one issue with the text is that it is largely geared toward mainstreaming LGBTQ people who seek acceptance from their audiences. Additionally, students are coached by mentors and advisors to not appear too different or threatening *as LGBTQ people*, and their speeches are reviewed before they are performed to ensure the audience's comfort. In this way, Gonçalves largely focuses on how LGBTQ students construct and perform ethos for hetero(normative) audiences rather than for queercentric audiences as Harriet Malinowitz did 10 years earlier in *Textual Orientations* (Malinowitz 1995). As I have already argued, this queer lens adds a "queer habit of mind" which always already interrogates and disrupts the need for and motivation toward validation and legitimization. This refusal both grows from and constitutes agency.

Therefore, as Alexander and Rhodes ("Queer Rhetoric" 2012) explain, "This ethos emerges not from identity—that is, identity to what you know as normal. It emerges, rather, from resistance to

others defining our reality for us. This queerness says you might as well get used to it. Don't get us wrong; this queerness does not refuse to cooperate; it very well may. But that cooperation does not come hand-in-hand with the capitulation of our right to define ourselves." And so, as I have been arguing, it is crucial then to distinguish between a gay ethos and a queer ethos:

Gay ethos: subversive by nature, which I see as being more passive/defined or delineated by external factors and forces; an effect or result.

Queer ethos: intentionally subversive, which I see as being more active/compelled by internal factors and forces; a cause or action.

4. Gay Ethos, Integrity, and the Social Construction of "Outness"

[JH] While the fields of queer theory and gay and lesbian studies do not have a substantial history, as far as I have been able to determine, of focusing on what I have been terming "gay ethos", there are two important references in the literature that refer more or less directly to ethos. Fryer (2010) advocates for the emergence of a "new field", one that centers on the *ethics of identity*, arguing "the motivating question is not primarily the traditional question of ethics, what ought we to do? Instead, the motivating question becomes, in this unethical world, this word of hatred and injustice, *who ought we to be?*" (p. xvi). The plural, *who ought we to be*, is by no means accidental, and coincides with an emphasis on the social. A decade or so earlier, Mark Blasius (2001) made an almost identical claim when he argued in his essay "An Ethos of Lesbian and Gay Existence" when he foregrounded the term ethos, asserting that "lesbian and gay existence should be conceived as an ethos rather than as a sexual preference or orientation, as a lifestyle, or *primarily* in collectivist terms, as a subculture, or even as a community" (p. 143). Blasius focuses almost exclusively on the political, and maintains that the "key to understanding ethos is through the lesbian and gay conceptualization of 'coming out'" (p. 144). I have deliberately delayed a reference to Blasius' work until near the end of my essay, because his terminology surrounding gay and lesbian ethos has not, as far as I have been able to determine, actually "caught on" in the fields of either gay and lesbian studies or queer theory. More importantly, given Blasius' limited focus on ethos as "coming out," I am not entirely certain that his understanding of ethos is particularly functional.

[HG] In recent years, in the fields of rhetoric and composition and rhetorical theory, there have been numerous contributions regarding LGBTQ and queer ethos and rhetorical agency, from Wallace and Alexander (2009); Alexander and Rhodes (2011, 2012); Rand (2014); and Glasby (2014).

In response to Blasius' position on ethos, I would add that *being out*, and being and *doing* queer, are very different than, although akin to, coming out. Anyone who is LGBTQ understands what it is like to decide whether to come out or out themselves in a certain moment (say when someone assumes they are in a heterosexual relationship or incorrectly reads their LGBTQ relationship) and whether or not it is worth the emotional labor to tackle heteronormativity in that instance. Other times, we come out in order to be out later on, to establish an identity and politic. For example, when I meet a new group of students at the beginning of the semester, I come out as a queer lesbian to them so I can *be* out from the first day forward. However, if I'm on the phone with the person installing my new countertops and I mention that I need to push back the date so I can paint the kitchen first and he says, "just tell your husband to do it; that's what my wife would do," I might not come out in that moment because it's not worth my time or energy. Frankly, it would be exhausting to come out every time someone made hetero assumptions about me, although it can be quite fun and subversive to do so in other moments, such as when people assume my wife and I are sisters (which actually happens a lot). In this way, then, ethos is always more than functional, as it is also *rhetorical*—situated, social, ecological, and emergent. That is to say, when and how we exert, emphasize, or sideline an ethos very much depends on the context of the specific situation, the audience at hand, and the physical and emotional well-being of the rhetor. That ethos—and the positions that we do or do not take in those

moments—are also very much informed, inspired, and influenced by similar situations that we may have faced and managed in the past.

[JH] Before closing with a very generalized and partial taxonomy of available constructions of gay ethos, I want to pause for a final argument in which I suggest that the idea that gay ethos is to be expressed primarily in “coming out” is both needlessly restrictive and also a particular social construction in its own right, with its own history. To return to the place where we began, with Larry Kramer, I wish to argue that the rhetoric that surrounding the closet was made possible, in no small part, by the rhetoric that Kramer made popular in his early work with the group known as the Gay Man’s Health Crisis and later in the activism behind ACT UP. In a rhetorical analysis of Kramer’s polemical rhetoric, Erin Rand (2008) quotes from Kramer’s “1112 and Counting,” [which was] originally published in the *New York Native* in 1983: “I am sick of closeted gays ... There is only one thing that’s going to save some of us, and this is numbers and pressure and our being perceived as united and a threat ... Unless we can generate, visibly, numbers, masses, we are going to die” (p. 303). Rand notices that this rhetoric essentially lacks nuance, and also does not follow the logic of a conventional argument: “In this passage, Kramer does not attempt to address the various reasons for which individuals may be unable to come out or may choose not to do so; nor does he offer evidence that coming out in large numbers is necessarily linked to empowerment or to increased AIDS research and better medical care” (p. 303). In considering the constructions of gay ethos through public rhetoric, Kramer’s language would fall under a category that might be labeled a confrontational rhetoric calling for universal outness, which would then presumably lead to appropriate justice and redress.

However, both Butler (1993) and Halperin (1995) offer more sophisticated analysis of the discourse surrounding “outness”, with Butler noting that being “out” is not universally available: “For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option. Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal ‘outness’? [...] For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics” (*Bodies That Matter* p. 227)? I am suggesting that involved in the constructions of a gay ethos must surely be an awareness that gay identity always co-exists with many other identities. I am also suggesting that the extent to which an individual subject chooses to align with various communities in moving through the world will be incredibly varied. To disobey the edict that one must be “out” in all contexts is not always a decision based only on fear or on lack of courage. (What appears to be a self-protective decision may in, some cases, be a decision made to protect others. In a pedagogical context, a certain reserve may also allow students to pursue productive lines of inquiry that might otherwise be foreclosed in advance.) Such selectivity—again practiced in the context of communities with which one must associate, and in the context of communities with whom one chooses to associate—actually becomes a part of the integrity involved in the creation of any ethical self, including in the self-aware constructions of ethos.

Along similar lines, Halperin (1995) notes that the process of “coming out” is inevitably often misread by others: “The closet is an impossibly contradictory place, moreover, because when you do come out, it’s both too soon and too late” (*Saint Foucault* p. 35). Halperin continues with the most common rhetorical responses, the first suggesting premature speech: “Why do you have to shove it in our faces?” Variety—or, in the better circles, the supremely urbane form of feigned boredom and indifference: “Why did you imagine that we would be interested in knowing such an inconsequential and trivial fact about you?” (p. 35). [However], as Halperin explains, such self-disclosure is also “already too late, because if you had been honest, you would have come out earlier” (p. 35). What Halperin’s work also puts in sharper relief is that constructions of gay ethos occur all over the place within culture, and are by no means limited to the self-fashioning or self-creating/representing of people who identify as agents with gay identities. Halperin notes: “To come out is precisely to expose oneself to a different set of dangers and constraints, to make one oneself into a convenient screen onto which straight people can project all the fantasies they routinely entertain about gay people” (p. 30). In short, a gay ethos will always be responding to a range of external representations, sometimes positive but often not, that are marshaled by non-gay subjects.

[HG] Again, I believe this is, perhaps, the most significant difference between a gay ethos and a queer ethos. A queer ethos is less concerned with non-queer/LGBTQ audiences, focusing more on other queer/LGBTQ individuals, so the rhetor's moves, appeals, strategies, and content are not concerned with establishing credibility despite/in spite of being queer/LGBTQ. There is less need to explain the marginalization and lived experience of being LGBTQ or forge a connection of "sameness" in order to build understanding and empathy, because those affects are always already present for the queer/LGBTQ audience. Hence, rhetorical choices are more internally driven rather than externally influenced. Rather than establishing ethos through more conventional and acceptable modes, a queer ethos recognizes, values, and honors alternative modes. That is to say, the queer rhetor's ethos might be established through personal experience, emotion, positionality, solidarity, trauma, social justice, queer bodies, sex, and desire, and critiques of normativity rather than through traditional notions of credibility and legitimacy that draw on coherent, formal, and distanced empirical and quantitative research.

Rather than being polished and clear, queer rhetorics are messy, ambivalent, unsure of themselves, freer, more experimental with form and genre, open ended, and raw. Queer rhetors and their texts address oppression and normativity head on rather than politely sidestepping so as not to offend or discomfort. As I explain in "Let Me Queer My Throat: Queer Rhetorics of Negotiation: Marriage Equality and Homonormativity": "rather than asking for the authority to speak, write, and be heard, we must grant ourselves the ethos to speak, without fear of being censored or censured" (Glasby "Queer Ethos" 2014).

5. Gay Ethos and a Taxonomy of Available Rhetoric

Why would we want to be normal? Isn't the normal what has always oppressed us? Mari Ruti (2017, p. 1)

[JH] In closing, let me suggest an all-too-brief taxonomy of the range of rhetorics that I consider relevant to the constructions of gay ethos. In addition to Kramer's "confrontational rhetoric", which I identified early and late, there is a "minimizing rhetoric", based on the argument that the difference between gay and straight, non-normative and normative, is a relatively minor difference, akin to whether one was born with brown eyes or blue. There is also, I think, "affiliative rhetoric", [which is] practiced most often by those who have discovered that a close family member or friend identifies as gay, and therefore [become] committed to an ethos of dignity and equality in the treatment of gay people, with a stronger commitment because of a personal knowledge of and closeness to someone who is gay. Finally, there continues to be a split in rhetoric between gay and lesbian activists and queer theorists, with the former arguing for a place within existing institutions (including the traditional institutions of marriage and the military); the latter argues for a critique not only of identities, but also in existing institutions and institutional structures that are not working particularly well in the present for many people who inhabit them.

[HG] In taking this a step further, we locate a commonality among queer theorists/scholars and activists (for many of us occupy both spaces): considering how these institutions create and reward certain identities while deterring and punishing others. However, a more interesting distinction should be made between liberal LGBTQ folks and radical queer(nes)s. Rather than being integrated into the existing system, radical queer activists are concerned with dismantling these institutions and systems of power because justice cannot be retrofit in an inherently racist, (hetero)sexist, xenophobic framework.

As Mari Ruti explains in *The Ethics of Opting Out* (2017):

Although the rhetoric of opting out of normative society—of defying the cultural status quo, refusing to play along, and living by an alternative set of rules—has always been an important trope of queer theory, the dawn of the 21st century has witnessed an escalation of the queer theoretical idiom of opting out, driving a wedge between mainstream LGBTQ

activists fighting for full social inclusion and radicalized queer critics who see gay and lesbian normalization as a betrayal of queer politics. (p. 1)

[JH] Paisley Currah (2001) identifies the distinction here as being between “the politics of the local and the politics of deconstruction” (p. 194). Currah quotes the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw to argue: “At this point in history, a strong case can be made that the most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location rather than to vacate and destroy it” (p. 194). The politics of the local depends on a rhetoric or an ethos that is sufficient to convince folks that disenfranchised gay people seeking fuller equality are actually quite similar to the audience whose favor they are attempting to win, inhabiting a world of shared values and institutions, and, although varied, inhabiting the same drives. There is probably a reason that Kramer, borrowing from Auden, titled his play *The Normal Heart*.

[HG] A *normal* heart implies a homonormative appeal. Of course, the “normal” heart is one worth pitying and empathizing with, since it is *almost* like a hetero heart. [However], our bodies, lives, and hearts are *queer*, not normal. [Similar to] our hearts, our experiences and access to rights and safety just are not the same as they are for (cis) hetero folks.

[JH] When I think of Kramer’s choice in using that title, the deconstructionist in me remembers lines from elsewhere in the W. H. Auden (1939) poem “September 1, 1939” that also seems to me to have everything to do with the impetus of queer theory to confront how much of identity is indeed socially constructed, and in a way that not always works terribly well for anyone involved:

All I have is a voice
 To undo the folded lie,
 The romantic lie in the brain
 Of the sensual man-in-the-street
 And the lie of Authority
 Whose buildings grope the sky:
 There is no such thing as the State
 And no one exists alone;
 Hunger allows no choice
 To the citizen or the police;
 We must love one another or die.

6. “What Is a Woman in Solitude: A Queer Woman or Man”: A Case Study of Adrienne Rich’s “Yom Kippur”

[JH] Adrienne Rich (1927–2012) ranks among the most important post-WWII contemporary American poets, and many of her poems might be cited as exploring the construction of gay and lesbian ethos (although she does not, to my knowledge, use the term “ethos”). For more than four decades (at least), her poetry explored issues of sexuality, ethics, and both collective and individual identity. Dated by her “1984–1985”, Rich’s poem “Yom Kippur” enacts a number of issues in the creation of gay and lesbian ethos, including the future-looking quality of such an ethos, its partial indeterminacy, its productive tension between the individual and the collective, and its need to provide new modes of being and language that is not necessarily readily available in more dominant cultures. The opening of the poem touches on all of these issues, including (with the poem’s emphasis on solitude) the construction of an individual self (Rich 1986):

What is a Jew in solitude?
 What would it mean not to feel lonely or afraid
 far from your own or those you have called your own?
 What is a woman in solitude: a queer woman or man?
 In the empty street, on the empty beach, in the desert
 What in this world as it is can solitude mean? (p. 75)

The questions posed here are both rhetorical and literal; [they are] rhetorical in the sense that religious identity and gender identity are always determined in the context of a community. [They are] literal in the sense that the poem continues to explore the meaning of solitude, and the speaker's drive toward it. That solitude has to do, at least in part, with the hard work of creating an identity, a subject position if you will, that is not supposed to exist. In the specific context of "Yom Kippur", that solitude also has to do with a "queer" woman or man who also has a religious identity or affiliation, a combination that much contemporary conservative rhetoric seeks to deny, positing a strict and mutually exclusive opposition between—on the one hand—religious identity, and—on the other hand—gay or "queer" identity.

[HG] Rich's poem is indeed queer in that it evokes intersectionality and the complicatedness of being both Jewish and queer, which are two identities that have suffered immeasurable injustice and oppression—each on their own and together during the Holocaust and, sadly, even still today.

[JH] Rich considerably ups the stakes in this debate when she narrates an act of historical violence, an event that (in part) motivated the poem:

[. . .] Jew who has turned her back/on midrash and mitzvah (yet wears the chai on a thong between her breasts) hiking alone/found with a swastika carved in her back at the foot of the cliffs (did she die as a queer or/as a Jew?) (p. 77)

In this context, "chai" is the Hebrew word for "life," a clearly recognized symbol from Judaism. Solitude shifts here to include not just the creation of a non-standard identity, but also the physical risks that the expression of that identity still carry. While Rich's example may seem extreme, it is a necessary reminder that, even into the present, a certain element of fear persists on the psychic level behind any construction or representation of a gay ethos.

If Rich's poem acknowledges that fear, it also embodies a future hope for broader, more inclusive understandings of the construction of gender and sexual identity. The poem looks forward, I think, to the continuing construction of a queer ethos:

When we who refuse to be women and men as women and men are chartered, tell our stories of/solitude spent in multitude / in that world as it may be, newborn and haunted, what will solitude mean? (p. 78)

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