Products of Heteronormativity

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The pervasive nature of heteronormativity, one that often seems set-in-stone, is prevalent in various facets of life affecting people of all ages, races, and gender identities, oftentimes reinforcing their subjugation. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's essay "Sex in Public" published in 1998 explores and critiques various forms of sexuality, as they are positioned societally, in varying discourses ranging from social to cultural to political. The authors explore the presence of sex in public discourse and the lenses through which they are filtered and presented to (and interpreted by) the public by many institutions. Ranging in perspective and the aims of their critiques, Berlant and Warner effectively question the modes of interpretation and assumption in place that are perpetuated in public discourses, resulting in their deeper investigation into various issues and discourses. The primary focus of this essay will be identifying its critical axioms that are most relevant to the process of coming out, as associated with LGBTQIA+ people and communities, and its framing and perpetuation of otherness in public discourse and, more generally, the unspoken/assumed societal frameworks and structures that govern society (particularly in North America). More specifically, this essay will engage with Berlant and Warners essay more broadly, then further explore notions of binaries and heteronormativity, and explore the concept of coming out and its relevance in the modern day.

The phrase "sex in public" as it operates in the essay refers to the ways sex (in various forms) is dispersed to the public and the ways in which it is perceived and interacted with

(actions, attitudes, and general outlooks). Berlant and Warner delve into how sex, not necessarily sexual acts, is policed, politicized, and weaponized in general society and by larger institutions Reddy 2 that weigh heavily on the structures and fabric of society. The heavy surveillance and poor management of sex in public (discussions around sex/perceptions of sex in the public sphere) and the ways in which these restrictive measures are perpetuated in society are looked at under a critical lens, posing questions surrounding the implications of such structures and ways of thinking. Berlant and Warner dissect many of the shortcomings regarding how sex is discussed and perceived in society, bringing up discussions of normality and hierarchy/power dynamics/power structures/binaries.

Normality and binaries/power hierarchies, particularly relating to sexual identity, are analyzed in their modern/close-to-modern social perception. The binary of heterosexuality and the "other" is greatly emphasized as it is deeply rooted in patriarchal and suppressive ideologies/intentions which end up posing one end of the binary, heterosexuality, above the other, homosexuality and queer identities, to dominate, sparking an imbalance of power. While such imbalances are pointed out in the broader binary, there is the further layer of what the general public and larger institutions deem as more acceptable within the scale of non-heterosexuality. Such sub-divisions and assignments of importance can be seen through mindsets regarding what forms of non-heterosexuality are more acceptable than others, e.g. if a person were to deem bisexual people better than gay or lesbian people because of their proximity to heterosexuality. Such deep seeded hierarchical imbalances, and the notion of "normalcy" vs "other" results in heteronormativity—a term popularized by Michael Warner referring to the adopted social/cultural assumption that heterosexuality is the norm or baseline, which pushes all forms of existence outside of said baseline to be "othered" (Warner 63-65)—being the governing thought

process in society, causing conversations or issues surrounding queer people to stay in circulation among various social and political discourses. The persistence of such discourse often results in Reddy 3 the inflation or weaponization of such conversations and issues, which then get further reflected in policies that are carried out and limitations that are enforced to further ostracize or restrict queer people's access, further affecting their physical and mental states as a result. The marginalization of queer people and communities further reinforces and perpetuates the systems and ways of thinking that are in place, contributing to a larger society governed by a hierarchy that shows little room for development or progress, continuing the feedback loop between perception/assumption (by society and institutions) and action/impact (on queer people). This feedback loop in turn produces more systems and concepts that serve to reinforce heteronormativity—like the idea of coming out.

The process of coming out of the closet is one that is deeply personal and significant in many LGBTQIA+ people's lives, wherein they actualize and come to terms with their identity (gender orientation, sexual orientation, and/or romantic orientation), disclosing it to those they are comfortable with. Coming out has become a very common process in current (especially Western/North American) communities/society, being shadowed by many prejudices and assumptions. The positioning of coming out being a process in which one rejects or goes against heteronormativity and expresses their true identity assumes that heteronormativity is the baseline until they (queer people) do the work to come out and label their identity.

Further, as queerness is not seen as normative, there is a phenomenon within social discourse which further pushes the binary labeling of people as either strictly being heterosexual or not as a means of gaining a (poor) understanding of queer identity and theories. Seeing as how these topics have been censored or hidden from the public sphere—by way of being forcibly

pushed out of the public consciousness/discourses—negative public opinions and attitudes (both working in a cycle feeding off of one another) are further perpetuated and reinforced. Such Reddy 4 binary labeling also paradoxes the idea of gender identity and sexual orientation being spectrums, an element that pushes queerness further from heteronormativity, making it easier to harbour hostility against it on both an individual and institutional level. While such hostility can be internal, it can also manifest in ways that directly harm the queer community, affecting how people are able to exist within a given society or community as a whole.

Berlant and Warner in their article "Sex in Public" speak to the privatization and censorship of sex and sexuality in public spheres by larger institutions like policymakers and how that is perpetuated by the othering and denigration, harming not only queer communities but heterosexual ones as well. In the section titled "Scene 2", Berlant and Warner highlight the subjugation of sex in public spaces and discourse through examples of law and policy in 1995 New York that ostracized and diminished the presence of sex in public (1036-1037). The policy introduced new zoning laws that would greatly affect businesses that catered to adult demographics, causing the majority of them to shut down (1036). With the mass shutdown of various businesses and establishments, all adults, but especially queer people, were made to seek adult materials or experiences by means that could cost more, be less accessible, or put them at risk for physical danger (1037). The impacts of such control on sex and queerness in the public eye/in public discourses is exemplified by Berlant and Warner in the explanations of the ways such laws and policies can result in the creation of less safe spaces for queer people, who are commonly associated with and affected by representations of sex in public, and how such subjugation reinforces negative mindsets regarding sex/sexuality/intimacy more generally, trickling down to heterosexual culture (1037).

Regarding heterosexual culture, the subjugation of queerness and sex publicly, adopted attitudes and discourses, also greatly affects perception and attitudes towards sex in public as it Reddy 5 applies to everyone. Given the historically conservative attitudes towards public expressions of and discourses surrounding sex, sexuality, and intimacy, similar sentiments have stayed constant in current societal contexts and prevalent discourses. The persistence of such attitudes has fostered a sustained prejudice against queerness, as well as a propensity of performativity, where people feel pressure to hyperbolize their expression of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation through stereotypes. An example of performativity that can be seen in modern culture is through Alpha Male podcasts, which are podcasts that consist of men who are heavily prescribed to historical and stereotypical assumptions of how men should act and be perceived in society, often coming to the consensus that men are the most valuable portion of humanity (von Rueden 1). These projections of superiority can be seen as the result of insecurity or a need to prove oneself as worthy in societies/cultures that heavily promote and reinforce heteronormativity—requiring these men to perform heteronormativity to have worth and social currency. However, despite the historical prominence of heteronormative culture and perceptions, there has also been a rise (more marketed, published, and accessible than previously) and slow acceptance/awareness of queer theories. The trajectories for change and improvement posited by discussions surrounding queer acceptance and queerness as something that does/can apply to everyone, to an extent, has opened room for wider discussion, forms of liberation, free expression, and exploration of people's identities, creating less need for heteronormative performativity amongst general populations (though it does still exist).

As a countermeasure to the heteronormative culture that drives much of the world and governs the forms of identity and existence that are acceptable, Berlant and Warner pose the

more wide-scale integration of Queer Culture (1040-1043). They outline a world-making process

wherein various diverse and multifaceted communities and identities coexist absent of the Reddy

6 prescriptive and hierarchical structures and biases that govern modern thought and policy,

creating space for authenticity and interconnectedness through expansion and acceptance

(Berlant and Warner 1043). The implications of such world building show promise in the

deconstruction of normativity and heteronormative culture as a referent/baseline, bringing space

for existence outside of labels and hierarchical structuring in which certain groups and identities

are criminalized, having their identities used against them to create spaces and communities in

which they are less safe and discriminated against (both personally and through policies).

Overall, Berlant and Warner in their essay "Sex in Public" disseminate the views on, and

discourses surrounding, sex in the public sphere as they are poorly mediated in their perpetuation

of normativity and othering. They discuss how the dominant frames governing society push

queer people to the margins of society, othering them and pushing the notion that they need to

come out because the assumed baseline is heteronormativity. In applying their discussions to the

concept of coming out and the general existence of queerness within society, the placement of

coming out as a milestone and something that needs to occur in the lives of LGBTQIA+ people

itself becomes one that only serves to further other queer people, reifying the dominant frames

regarding identity that govern society. As a result, queerness is not seen as normative, creating a

space of otherness and further pushing the binary of strictly being heterosexual or not,

paradoxing the idea of sexuality being a spectrum and further reinforcing social stigmas which

can trickle into a variety of political discussions causing it to be weaponized and used to hurt

people of those marginalized communities. The persistent othering of queer people keeps them

confined in social/patriarchal hierarchies, which constantly brings identity into the scope of

society and institutions as something for them to perceive/have an opinion on/influence, when

that should typically be an internal process that one should go through without being met with

Reddy 7 extreme reactions on either end of the spectrum (happy or sad/mad). These

perpetuations and poor mediations of discourse not only harm queer people, but also people who

align with, or feel the incessant need to align, with heteronormativity, fostering prejudice and

performativity. The tools/axioms/solutions posed by Berlant and Warner urge the reimagining of

social frameworks (heteronormativity and the privatization of sex) as a means of improving

peoples' (individually and institutionally) understanding of, and attitudes towards, queer people,

and more largely, sex in public.

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