Queer Killjoys: 
Individuality, Niceness, and the Failure of Current Ally Culture

by

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Preface:
Can We Be Enough?

As a queer woman, who is white, able-bodied, and cisgender,¹ I am a person who might be said to both have allies, and who might be called an ally to other groups. This complexity breeds a certain degree of frustration around a term that might, at first glance, seem empty, vacuous, unworthy of ethnographic exploration. Indeed, the term “ally” is used everywhere from the Human Rights Campaign to schools’ diversity statements. It has become ubiquitous when discussing rights or social movements. It means very little on its own due to the range of situations to which it can be applied, and therefore my feelings about and understandings of allyship rely upon context. It is a term I have been seeing for as long as I can remember, that I come across online, in political discourse, in institutional announcements, and in daily conversation.

I grew up in the era of the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA): one of my first experiences in the field of allyship was my high school’s GSA. It is possible that the term “ally” was originally popularized, at least in part, through GSAs. GSAs are high school clubs designed to facilitate both support and political action around LGBT issues by students of all sexualities. They began in the 1990s in a few private schools

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¹ I use cisgender to mean people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, and trans* to mean people who identify outside of the gender they were assigned at birth. Trans*, written with an asterisk to indicate multiple possible suffixes, is the term that most trans* people I have encountered prefer. LGBT will refer to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans*, as the acronym letters indicate, but I will also use it to include pansexual, queer, or any other identities that fall outside of heterosexual norms. Although the acronym “LGBT” only directly refers to some of these identities, it is a commonly used label that is considered more of an umbrella term despite this shortcoming. On occasion, I will instead use LGB to indicate that only sexuality and not gender is being considered, or to indicate the exclusion of trans* people from a specific instance. Queer, a term I use less, will be used for more radical or anti-assimilationist LGBT politics and people.
in Massachusetts, and departed from other LGBT groups for teenagers in that other
groups were “generally composed solely of LGBT students, and the focus of the
group was personal and not political” (Miceli 2005, 27). In contrast, GSAs worked
towards visibility and towards changing the culture and structure of high schools that
promotes discrimination and violence, physical and emotional, toward LGBT
students. The name, GSA, was chosen for the group both to show this cooperation
and to make the group less threatening than a purely gay organization in a high
school. “The alliance of straight people with gay people gave the groups greater
legitimacy and influence with school administrators, faculty, and the community at
large” (Miceli 2005, 28).

The impact of the Gay-Straight Alliance on current political cultures and
understandings, especially for those who experienced these clubs in high school, is
immense. Throughout my research I saw mentions of them, both as a way to
legitimate someone’s allyship and as the origin site for many of the allies active in
internet communities. In high school, being an ally meant being willing to publicly
state one’s support for LGBT students, and perhaps to go to meetings to discuss said
support. Later, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, “ally” has come to stand for and
gesture at a variety of political, social, and affective meanings.

Earlier this year at Wesleyan, a campus LGBT organization was handing out
rainbow stickers that read “ally” to anyone who wanted one. Anyone could claim to
be an ally by simply accepting a sticker. This caused some controversy, as LGBT
people were the ones who planned and staffed the event, putting their own energy
into recognizing allies. To me, this seems to imply that someone wearing a sticker
that says that they support LGBT equality- whatever that might mean to them- is not
only important, but important enough that effort should be directed toward spreading
this image. I was amongst the students protesting this event, handing out fliers to
people accepting the ally labels that explained that allies should listen and educate
themselves and, most crucially, they should not expect LGBT people to put in the
emotional labor to enable their allyship.

Of course, this form of allyship was extremely passive; the students who took
the stickers may have been anyone, with any level or lack thereof of support for
LGBT people in other parts of their lives. The label of ally, both literal and figurative,
was there for them to accept at their own discretion, with no qualifications to taking
up this description.

Other forms of allyship in which I have been involved on campus have been
more active, such as the participation of a number of cisgender students in the
unsanctioned degendering of campus bathrooms. The action was started by trans*
students, and their needs and words were deferred to, but allies helped in the physical
work of sign removal, and also gathered in support when the administration put
several students on trial for vandalism. Here, too, however, some students were more
active and others less so; there was a range of willingness to get into trouble with the
school. Allyship, then, is a somewhat volitional label: allies can remove themselves
when the politics are too threatening, because they are not as directly affected by the
outcome. I would still have a bathroom to use if I walked away from the bathroom
action, but would I still be an ally?
In this case, unlike the lunchtime stickers, allyship was restricted to this particular action. I was not participating in some kind of general trans* allyship, but instead allying with trans* Wesleyan students against the administration in an attempt to promote gender-neutral bathrooms. The specificity of the goal meant that some people who called themselves trans* allies were not in favor of the bathroom action, and some cisgender people who participated in the action might not claim the label of trans* ally. In other words, the politics of the bathroom action were not forged around claiming or critiquing the ally label.

Those who did claim the label “ally” tended to be those less involved in the action. For example, every straight, cisgender administrator on campus with whom I have spoken has described themself as an ally to LGBT students. However, their actions have not always followed from this self-definition. During the same moment of trans* activism, the “allies” were those who said that they wished that they could help, but they could not. It was never because they were against trans* students, of course, but that changing the signs would cost too much, or would happen later, or would make other students uncomfortable. Simply by claiming the label “ally,” a form of passive “caring” about the needs of trans* people, the administrators could effectively ignore the needs of trans* students and instead actively prioritize other aspects of the issue, without feeling that this negated their status as allies. No one else could tell them otherwise, because their own motivations were the only reason they needed for this self-understanding- not the agreement of the actual trans* students. They understood themselves as wanting to help trans* students, even if this help was limited to the very specific expressions they, as cisgender people in charge of the
university, were comfortable making. In this way, being an ally can legitimate some people’s own self-understandings as good, unprejudiced subjects, regardless of their behavior or its effects.

I am disquieted by such claims. In this case, being an ally means tolerating LGBT students, and helping them, but only as long as it doesn’t get in the way of other things, and does not require difficult work, such as confronting the transphobic discomfort of others. Being an ally means that one would like to help, just not enough to actually do so.

I have repeatedly expressed frustration with people who would claim to be my allies; none of the opinions I have just voiced are ones that had previously gone unmentioned. I am lucky to be in a place where I can feel safe doing so. But not everyone does; to not be able to ask to have one’s needs met by people whose presence is supposedly for one’s benefit- in other words, allies- seems not only to defeat their purpose. It is also a perpetuation of systematic inequalities when those who exercise power over those they are supposed to be allied to are enabled to continue calling themselves allies. Due to all of the problems I see in “my” allies, I have a great deal of motivation to do better when I attempt to act in solidarity with others. I try to listen, to defer to their expertise, to acknowledge my own privilege and work against it. But I do not always succeed. And I have been called out on this failure.

Just last semester, I came out of a racially-charged classroom discussion and was told by another student, “I was looking at you because I wanted you to say something and you didn’t.” This experience was difficult for me. But it was more
difficult, I would presume, for my friend, who had had to listen to his peers say clearly racist things while no one flat out told them they were wrong and that they were being oppressive. Sometimes it is helpful for an ally to be the one to speak, rather than the one of only two black students in the class, who might have neither the energy nor the obligation to fight racism constantly. Sadly, too, the other white student may have seen me as more objective than a black student on matters of racism and thus listened more carefully to my opinion. However, I did not take my opportunity to exercise my privilege in a slightly more positive way. It’s not that I did not say anything, it’s that I did not say enough. And what is good enough is not for me to decide: he told me that it was not enough, so it was not enough. I needed to try harder.

What happens in these moments is complex: I, in part, did not speak up because I did not want to speak over the students of color in the room. I never want to assume that my white voice is desired or helpful, and in my general understanding of allyship, this assumption is frequently one of the greatest flaws of self-described allies. Yet in this case, my wariness actually prevented me from responding to the needs of someone with whom I was supposed to be in solidarity. Fear of being a “bad ally” can be paralyzing. But still, the only option is to work harder to occupy useful positions as allies, knowing that the usefulness of our actions must be determined by those with whom we act in solidarity and in the context of those actions, not by our own self understandings.

If I am to be an ally, I must first recognize that it is not an identity, but a goal. This does not mean that I will never do the right thing or that I will never help. I
simply mean to say that I can never accomplish allyship. Such work is never done, because allyship must always be relational. I am allied to someone.

We cannot see ourselves as individuals, disconnected from other people who share our identities and our privileges, while those who are oppressed must be communities. I am implicated in white privilege, in the oppression of others, and in the failures of allies, both my own and those of others. I am guilty of letting people think that what they do is good enough, and of thinking that of myself. Allyship is not an individual endeavor, or a title one can bestow on oneself. It is necessarily relational and, for once, the usual hierarchy of knowledge and validation must be reversed to allow for the power to rest with those who are oppressed.

For these reasons, I hold this project close to my heart, as allyship is an issue that profoundly and directly affects my life. My lack of objective removal from the topic does not, however, prevent my ability to study it. Rather, I would prefer to think that my connection enhances and even helps to legitimate my work, as I am not speaking over others, or at least no more than is unavoidable.

All of the sites in which I conducted my research were ones that I was familiar with before I officially began this project. Part of my understanding of ally culture, and reactions to it, is due to my personal immersion into this process. One does not enter into such a project- or into allyship- without an emotional connection. But an emotional connection, on its own, is not enough. It was in part due to this that I have completed this project: simply feeling badly about current forms of allyship does not accomplish what I hope to accomplish here. Instead, I hope to point to more specific, but also more systematic problems, in order to draw out how the bigger conflicts and
moments of “bad allyship” become possible and even defendable. I do this not because I believe that there is something wrong with wanting to help create change, or greater equality, but rather because I believe that in order for these goals to be truly achievable they must be approached in a different way. I hope this thesis might provide some critical ground for rethinking allyship.
Introduction: Creating Ally Culture

Alliance as politics originally emerged as a tool of coalition building rather than as a system of one-sided support, as is common now. Janet Jakobsen, writing in the 1990s, suggested an alliance politics in which both sides are *allied to each other*, in order to form mutual goals and create nonhierarchical spaces in which different people can interact in new ways. She mentions alliances between various marginalized groups, rather than simply between a center and periphery on a single axis of difference. “Alliances are not the outcome of connections across pre-determined units of ‘difference,’” she writes, “but are the constitutive subject matter of activity located within diverse and complex social relations” that must be “mobilized to challenge dominating power relations” (Jakobsen 1998, 21). These alliances would attempt to do difference differently, in order to create new kinds of social bonds and disrupt hierarchical power structures.

This is not, however, how what we now call “ally politics” functions. Although it has only been 16 years since *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference* was published, allyship as a concept has been dramatically altered and has become so central to popular activist discussions in the US that imagining it differently can be difficult. The shift from “alliance,” something existing between people or groups, to “ally,” an individual label or perhaps a verb, also denotes this shift away from coalition and connection. And these problems have become increasingly obvious and influential due to rising support for certain specific LGBT rights and the assimilationist tilt of current LGBT movement. As allyship becomes
more prominent, its problems become more capable of hurting LGBT people and movements. Celebrity allies are becoming more common, as are school Gay Straight Alliances, support in news sources, and representation in the mass media. Allyship has become the progressive thing to do. This is not to say that people who wish to be allies do not have good intentions, but they are also shaped by current visions of what allyship is and should be, visions that are often, as I aim to demonstrate, counterproductive.

Creating a wider base of support, branching out into groups with more power, and combining resources to achieve goals together—these goals of allyship seem like admirable and worthwhile objectives. And allyship is obviously an attempt to do the right thing. How, then, does it turn so bad? Allyship attempts to walk a thin line between being too little and being too much, between ignoring and overstating one’s own position, between a “we” and a “them.” In current iterations, it seems to be failing. This largely caused by a set of social conditions such as individualization, tolerance discourse, and structures of privilege and invisibility, due to which there is a pull into a political culture that expresses solidarity in empty statements and counterproductive actions.

In response to these shifts, critiques of allyship have begun to appear regularly online. For example, Mia McKenzie’s “No More ‘Allies’” is one of the most popular blog articles about the problems with current ally culture, pointing to things that allies should be doing:

1. shutting up and listening
2. educating yourself (you could start with the thousands of books and websites that already exist and are chock full of damn near everything anyone needs to know about most systems and practices of oppression)
3. when it’s time to talk, not talking over the people you claim to be in solidarity with
4. accepting feedback/criticism about how your “allyship” is causing more harm than good without whitesplaining/mansplaining/whateversplaining
5. shutting up and listening some more
6. supporting groups, projects, orgs, etc. run by and for marginalized people so our voices get to be the loudest on the issues that effect us
7. not expecting marginalized people to provide emotional labor for you

This list outlines ways in which allies can work against their own privilege, by being supportive and not expecting others to do educational and emotional work for them. It also emphasizes that allies should focus on doing background work rather than foregrounding their own opinions and voices.

As these critiques of allyship become more common, allyship has become a wildly discussed topic, especially in activist spheres online. In line with these critiques, I aim to explore a form of allyship that leads to further policing and continuation of social hierarchies within movements that supposedly aspire to deconstruct these very processes. Rather than admitting their own privilege and its relation to oppression, allies often only wish to recognize the disadvantages that minority people suffer while maintaining the idea that they themselves exist outside of this system. Due to the highly personal yet systematic nature of such privilege, attempting to point it out often leads to either an individualization of prejudice or a flattening where sociocultural processes seem merely legal inequalities or issues of visibility.

In order to deconstruct this form of allyship and its reinstitution of what I term “privilege through denial,” I will look at where it starts: how such a position is constructed in culturally legible terms, and how it is maintained and reproduced.

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Although such processes occur in many different forms of allyship, I will focus mainly on LGBT people and allies, while hoping that perhaps my work will speak to other systems of oppression and allyship in the current moment. I locate my analysis in the Internet communities and various online activists and blogs that have been at the forefront of this conversation. The remainder of this introduction provides an overview of the state of allyship, along with the key theoretical terrains necessary to understand the political and affective dynamics of ally culture today.

**Key Terrains 1: Neoliberalism**

*Neoliberalism and Homonormativity*

Neoliberalism is an ideology based around the idea of the free market as central to freedom, equality, and democracy. However, it extends beyond an economic or capitalist system and into an entire system of thought and behavior, what Wendy Brown described as a rationality (in “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy”). As Bradley Jones and Roopali Mukherjee write, neoliberalism is focused on extreme individuality and individual responsibility, removing the autonomous subject from the social realm and causing “the transformation of social identifications and solidarities that were once the domain of the political to the private realm of consumption" (Jones and Mukherjee 2010, 407). In addition, neoliberalism advocates privatization, in terms of ownership, government roles, and social private/public spheres, with the idea that the market will self-regulate, if left to its own devices. These two facets- individualism and privatization- combine to have a demobilizing effect on social change and politics.
Such transformations can be seen clearly in LGBT movements, especially in terms of a shift from more liberationist rhetoric to ideals of assimilation and homonormativity. Lisa Duggan describes this transformation as “homonormative:”

Gay civil rights groups have adopted neoliberal rhetoric and corporate decision-making models. No longer representative of a broad-based progressive movement, many of the dominant national lesbian and gay civil rights organizations have become the lobbying, legal, and public relations firms for an increasingly narrow gay, moneyed elite. Consequently, the push for gay marriage and military service has replaced the array of political, cultural, and economic issues that galvanized the national groups as they first emerged from a progressive social movement context several decades earlier. (Duggan 2003, 45)

These goals are profoundly normalizing, a trend that has been growing over time as a tactic of power that has been adopted as a tactic toward equality, even if this goal may be a false one. As Michel Foucault points out, “normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age,” and social position has come to be communicated through “a whole range of degrees of normality indicating membership of a homogenous social body but also playing a part in classification, hierarchization and the distribution of rank” (Foucault 1979, 184). This means that, when utilized by social movements, normalization is automatically counter to some of the rhetorical goals it is being applied towards, as normalization inherently involves some level of hierarchy due to varying abilities of different groups to assimilate into popular norms.

Despite this variance, a shift toward assimilation is still often experienced and described as equalizing. This is possible due to an overall discursive and ideological shift in what these strategic and frequently utilized words, “equality,” “freedom,” and “rights,” might signify:
This new homonormativity comes equipped with a rhetorical recoding of key terms in the history of gay politics: ‘equality’ becomes narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions, ‘freedom’ becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the ‘right to privacy’ becomes domestic confinement, and democratic politics itself becomes something to be escaped. All of this adds up to a corporate culture managed by a minimal state, achieved by the neoliberal privatization of affective as well as economic and public life. (Duggan 2003, 65-66)

These recodings and privatizations profoundly affect ally discourse as well, as allies come to see equality (for LGBT people) as a simple inclusion in dominant structures, even if this does not include all LGBT people, and does not challenge broader systems of privilege and power. Dominant structures can include the neoliberal market and, as Alexandra Chasin theorizes, consumption is believed to be a route towards inclusion and enfranchisement (Chasin 2001, 101). Consumption can include the desire of LGBT people to be consumer-citizens who can enact their purchasing power, and the push towards creating LGBT identities as consumable by others through media and popular culture.

In addition to this private consumerism, LGBT rights are in part based upon the ideal of private identity and actions that are one’s own business. Because of the prioritization of individual privacy and opinions, neoliberalism as a set of justifications can even result in the “equal support” of homophobic statements. This produces a bland form of tolerance in the face of difference that refuses to recognize oppression or varying hierarchical positions.

Diversity and Tolerance

Like the emphasis on individual rights and assimilation, “tolerance” is a hallmark of neoliberal political culture. Political theorist Wendy Brown argues that
tolerance is "a domestic discourse of ethnic, racial, and sexual regulation" that marks certain people as other, and as the undesirable subjects of the toleration of those who are normative (Brown 2006, 7). It also serves as a rhetoric of depoliticization, in which tolerance is enough to infer equality without actual social transformation: “Depoliticization involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its historical emergence and from a recognition of the powers that produce and contour it” (Brown 2006, 15).

The study of current trends in LGBT politics can benefit a great deal from anti-racism discourse and frames of analysis, which, like Brown, have emphasized the interlinkages of discourses on tolerance, diversity, and colorblindness. Tolerance is a starting point in this discourse, as tolerance, Brown writes, can help to hide and excuse a certain “mannered racism” (Brown 2006, 1). Tolerance rhetoric is frequently utilized in discussions of equality, yet it relies upon a fundamental hierarchy involving who makes norms and can decide to tolerate others, and who can only hope to be tolerated. As Susan Mendus writes, “If there is to be a question of tolerance, it is necessary that there should be something to be tolerated; there has to be some belief or practice or way of life that one group may think (however fanatically or unreasonably) to be wrong, or mistaken, or undesirable” (Mendus 2000, 66). In this way, tolerating requires a moral judgment, and, more systematically, the power to choose not to enforce this judgment against the abnormal other. It produces a tension “between one’s own commitments and the acceptance that other people may have other and perhaps quite distasteful commitments” (Mendus 2000, 67). By holding up tolerance as the pinnacle of an equal society, it becomes possible for privileged
people, even those who would claim to be allies of anti-racism or anti-homophobia, to claim that simply allowing others to exist in their undesirable difference is the same as challenging oppression.

Tolerance leads easily into diversity rhetoric, which serves to showcase difference while further obscuring hierarchies. Diversity is a way of making difference safe and palatable; diversity culture, as Jane Ward proposes, serves to "link matters of diversity with matters of quality and good taste" and professionalism, limiting expressions of diversity to those that are palatable to the general public and, importantly and in line with neoliberal ideals, marketable (Ward 2008, 53). In this way, both tolerance and diversity are fundamentally linked to a neoliberal market ideology, in that they serve, in part, to create an image of certain groups and companies as progressive and liberal without actually redistributing economic power. In ally culture, individualism and tolerance are key discourses that allow for certain inequalities to flourish while they are, at the same time, glossed over with the idea and image of diversity.

*Colorblindness and Cultures of Denial*

Colorblind ideology relies upon the assumption that racism is over, and that the best way to ensure equality is to completely ignore racial difference. George Lipsitz writes on the “possessive investment in whiteness,” in which white people retain and reaffirm privilege through both individual attitude and public policy. White people then reap the benefits of this privilege, yet

Because they are ignorant of even the recent history of the possessive investment in whiteness- generated initially by slavery and segregation,
immigrant exclusion and Native American policy, conquest and colonialism, but augmented more recently by liberal and conservative social policies as well. White Americans produce largely cultural explanations for structural social problems. (Lipsitz 2006, 18)

This allows for a dismissal of any kind of institutionalized and widespread oppression.

However, since systematic discrimination exists, colorblindness serves as an alibi in which privilege is reproduced under the guise of equal opportunity. According to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, colorblind racism takes the following form: “If minority groups face group-based discrimination and whites have group-based advantages, demanding individual treatment for all can only benefit the advantaged group” (Bonilla-Silva 2010, 35-36). By demanding that all situations be considered in an isolated fashion, overarching structures of power can be ignored, reshaping equality as something that only concerns individuals. The extension of individualism in this form means that considering someone’s structural position can then be taken as racist in itself; affirmative action, for example, becomes “reverse racism” rather than an attempt to right systematic oppression.

Bonilla-Silva argues that “whites’ collective denial about the true nature of race relations may help them feel good, but it is also one of the greatest obstacles to doing the right thing. In racial matters as in therapy, the admission of denial is the preamble for the beginning of recovery” (Bonilla-Silva 2010, 183). Yet beyond just overcoming the “denial” that structures colorblind ideology, Bonilla-Silva argues that more must be done in order to actually counteract it: “Antiracist whites cannot just be ‘race traitors’; they must engage in struggles to end the practices and the ideology that maintain white supremacy. Individual racial treason without a political praxis to
eliminate the system that produces racial inequality amounts to racial showboating” (183). Without drawing a strict parallel between racism and homophobia or transphobia, I draw on these insights to suggest that similar dynamics are at work in the case of LGBT allyship. In particular, individualism in the form of understanding oppression as merely interpersonal, and allyship as “showboating” if allies do not struggle with structures of domination. Neoliberalism, and its concurrent discourses of diversity, tolerance, and colorblindness, serves to imagine equality as granted by abstracted individualism and market participation, while simultaneously disavowing the continuance of larger systems of domination and power.

**Key Terrains 2: Affect**

As this discussion of denial has suggested, the management and discussion of emotions is central to ally politics. Positive wishes and bad feelings—emotion is not only relation, but a form of political expression. For example, the expression of sentimentality has been a central way that the privileged felt a direct connection to the oppressed, due to a supposed shared emotion and even a shared experience of a kind of universal pain.

Abolitionists and others in American history have mobilized political support through sentimental depictions of suffering others. Sometimes, as Lauren Berlant writes, sentimentalism works to produce an affective state where one can feel good about oneself for feeling with others, without actually working to alter this power. She writes, “sentimentality from the top down softens risks to the conditions of privilege by making obligations to action mainly ameliorative, a matter not of
hanging the fundamental terms that organize power, but of following the elevated
claims of vigilant sensitivity, virtue, and conscience” (Berlant 2008, 35).

Sentimentalism allows for a kind of optimism, not for a future with greater
equality, but that there might be interpersonal equality now, as long as one does not
discriminate and feels with those who are oppressed. The goal here is not to alter
deeply embedded structures of domination, but rather to be sensitive to the harm that
they cause. Pain is understood as universal, as binding us together in a greater
understanding. “The turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety
constitutes a generic wish for an unconflicted world, one wherein structural
inequities, not emotions and intimacies, are epiphenomenal” (Berlant 2008, 21). Like
colorblindness and tolerance language, current forms of political feeling are both
individualizing and sentimentalizing. “Feeling for” is seen as achievement enough for
allies, and, like tolerance discourse, affect tends to divert attention away from
structural problems and toward affective resolutions. Further, as I will show, in the
play of affect, both allies and LGBT people are expected to be “positive,” a term that
tends to focus attention on the behavior of allies and LGBT people rather than on
larger structures of oppression.

One way in which normalized affect is produced online is through the
narrowing of acceptable expressions, particularly the impermissibility of negativity.
Negativity, on the part of LGBT people, is imagined to drive away potentially useful
allies; it is also seen as unrealistic or useless. This is in part because pragmatism and
rationality are central dynamics of neoliberal political discourse; in LGBT activism,
pragmatic politics has replaced utopian goals, with purportedly achievable, unemotional steps (Duggan 2003 and Muñoz 2009).

Pragmatism can lead to policing of less respectable emotions, yet many theorists would argue that negativity is an important part of LGBT experiences and movements. As Heather Love writes, “One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it… Given the new opportunities available to some gays and lesbians, the temptation to forget- to forget the outrages and humiliations of gay and lesbian history and to ignore the ongoing suffering of those not borne up by the rising tide of gay normalization- is stronger than ever” (Love 2007, 11). Further, emotions are generally understood to be a cornerstone of group mobilization, and this includes, maybe even most importantly, the negativity that prompts criticism and bad feeling. Sara Ahmed writes about the “feminist killjoy,” who refuses to orient herself towards a normative happiness. Rather than creating negativity or killing happiness, however, Ahmed suggests that the killjoy merely reveals it and puts it in the open. She asks:

Does bad feeling enter the room when somebody expresses anger about things, or could anger be the moment when the bad feelings that circulate through objects get brought to the surface in a certain way? The feminist subject "in the room" hence "brings others down" not only by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism but by exposing how happiness is sustained by erasing the signs of not getting along. (Ahmed 2010b, 66)

In this analysis, “getting along” is key to happiness, which relies on not “bringing others down” by discussing sexism, for example. Ahmed’s work reveals the ways that those who experience oppression are both more likely to be unhappy (feel “out of place”) and will be blamed for their own and others’ unhappiness if they reveal the ways in which they and their oppressors are “not getting along.”
Although this means that it is difficult to reveal such affective tension, the revelation of negativity can both unite communities and allow for a reorientation away from conventional happiness. As Deborah Gould writes, “the ability to evoke affective states and emotions, as well as to establish and enforce norms about feelings and their expressions- the power of an emotional habitus- is a dimension of power that we tend to overlook” (Gould 2009 40). Those who can dictate acceptable and desirable feelings, and can proceed to police the tones and expressions of others, have a great deal of power, as such affect shapes both actual actions and what actions are thinkable. However, Gould also more hopefully claims that affect also “has the potential to escape social control, and that quality creates greater space for counter-hegemonic possibilities and for social transformation” (Gould 2009 39). Despite the existence of emotional habitus, or sets of norms, there is still the potential for affect that eludes this structure, or subverts norms and works towards changing current emotional and social orders.

Histories of unhappiness can similarly spark social movement and situate these bad feelings within larger structures that contribute to them. Heather Love writes, "tarrying with this negativity is crucial; at the same time, the aim is to turn grief into grievance- to address the larger social structures, the regimes of domination, that are at the root of such pain" (Love 2007 151).

In what follows, I focus on negativity and positivity as two poles of political affect at work in ally culture. I aim to illustrate that policing negativity- through what is called “derailing” or through accusations of “straight hate”- is one way that the political power of ally and LGBT movements is flattened. At the same time, the
critiques of ally culture online reveal some of the political potential of negativity – as a way to challenge the discourse of positivity, individuality, and tolerance that depoliticizes LGBT-ally relationships and rejects critical engagement.

**Key Terrains 3: LGBT Movements Goals**

As I described above, neoliberalism as a cultural formation has shifted LGBT politics away from liberation and towards a politics of homonormativity: visibility, assimilation, and sameness. Visibility acclimatizes more of the dominant group to the existence of LGBT people, serving to normalize them. According to Yuvraj Joshi, visibility is crucially connected to respectability politics, as “public recognition of gay people and relationships is contingent upon their acquiring a respectable social identity” (Joshi 2012 417). Visibility, respectability, and normalization are intertwined: in order for visibility to be valuable, it must make acceptance seem appealing to the mainstream. This is done by presenting a normalized, respectable image of LGBT people (or perhaps just gay and lesbian people). As Lisa Duggan (2003), Jose Munoz (2009), and others have argued, the homonormative platforms of the LGBT movement have met a certain success in the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, and the growth of marriage equality in the United States.

So, for example, the assimilationist aims of the current mainstream LGBT movement focus primarily around marriage. Often, discourse promoting marriage utilizes an understanding of LGBT people as *normal*, or *the same* as straight, cisgender people, with similar life goals and desires for the same kind of nuclear family structure. As Joshi argues, “since the late 1970s, there has been a paradigm
shift within queer politics in which equality politics have eclipsed liberation politics. Legal recognition of same-sex relationships has become heralded as the final frontier of queer politics” (Joshi 2012 416). In this model, allies become important to the LGBT movement: cisgender, heterosexual people who “ally with” the LGBT movement can serve to validate the normality or sameness of LGBT people. Indeed, it is the visibility and the support of allies, regardless of their political action, that is imagined to advance the LGBT cause.

Additionally, a neoliberal understanding of the individual assumes that everyone can assimilate as a market citizen, and that this is the most crucial step towards freedom and equality. The application of market logic in terms of practicality and mass marketing fosters the current emphasis on visibility and market presence as tools toward LGBT equality, where equality might be imagined to be achieved through good consumer citizenship.

However, such visibility politics, connected with normalization and assimilation, ignore the ways in which "the cost of being folded into life might be quite steep, both for the subjects who are interpellated by or aspire to the tight inclusiveness of homonormativity offered in this moment, and for those who decline or are declined entry due to the undesirability of their race, ethnicity, religion, class, national origin, age, or bodily ability” (Puar 2007, 10, see also Foucault 1979, 187). In other words, inclusion is both limiting and exclusive; visibility serves both as a form of control or discipline and a means through which other differences are elided or even entrenched.
Despite these exclusions, the production of equality through visibility rests on an idea of a value free difference. As Jones and Mukherjee write, "It is this neoliberal conception of difference, isolated from relationships of power…which has undermined the legitimacy of the recognition of cultural difference in the public sphere" (Jones and Mukherjee 2010, 407-408). The effect of value-free difference is that all oppressions come to seem the same: criticisms or hurt feelings on the part of self-described allies are seen as the equivalent of systematic and ongoing LGBT oppressions, since context is not being taken into account. This also relies on individualism. As Michael Kimmel writes,

In a culture such as ours, all problems are thought to be individual problems, based on bad attitudes, wrong choices, or our own frailties and addictions. When confronted with structural or social problems, we think either that the solutions are either aggregated individual solutions- everyone needs to change their attitudes- or that there are no solutions (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 8).

The dynamic of equalizing difference serves to produce an idea that prejudice is a personal failing rather than a system of oppression perpetuated throughout society. Interpersonal relations laden with power come to be seen as situations in which each person is responsible for their own behavior and which do not necessarily reflect any wider systems. In ally culture, the problem becomes prejudice or bad feelings, not systematic oppression and privilege. This means that allies often cannot grasp their own privilege, as discussed by Noor Al-Sibai in the article “Privilege Discomfort: Why You Need to Get the Fuck Over it:”

The process of realizing one’s privilege — of recognizing simultaneously that your group is oppressive and, more importantly, that you are a member of the oppressive class — is difficult for those who have believed for their whole lives that they are purveyors of equality, or, at the very least, that they’re not racist/sexist/homophobic, etc. It’s a redefinition process that takes constant effort and is enormously difficult. But the fact remains that it is the discomfort
and isolation of the privileged that stops them from recognizing and doing something about the oppression of others.³

When equality is understood as separate from power, a function of visibility and nothing more, structural privilege can be sidelined or sidestepped. Allies might be able to recognize certain forms of disadvantage to being LGBT, but not that these disadvantages correspond to benefits for themselves, and other cisgender, heterosexual people. Linda Black and David Stone define privilege as the following:

First, privilege is a special advantage; it is neither common nor universal. Second, it is granted, not earned or brought into being by one's individual effort or talent. Third, privilege is a right or entitlement that is related to a preferred status or rank. Fourth, privilege is exercised for the benefit of the recipient and to the exclusion or detriment of others. Finally, a privileged status is often outside of the awareness of the person possessing it. (Black and Stone 2005, 244)

In this way, allies often wish to combat oppression without losing their own social benefits, and do not realize the impossibility of this goal since oppression and privilege draw upon and construct each other.

The neoliberal emphasis on the individual and not the system produces, in ally culture, a belief that the individual can step outside of their circumstances: if they are trying to spread equality, how can they be part of the problem? This construction enables allies to imagine themselves both as singular individuals and as universal subjects. On the one hand, allies want to separate themselves from other privileged people; they want to see themselves as different, as exceptional, as singular. Against a backdrop of homophobic culture, allies see themselves as politically effective and

therefore unique (see Park 2013⁴). On the other hand, because allies are normatively located, they are also seen as universal. As Michael Kimmel states, "When you are 'in power,' you needn't draw attention to yourself as a specific entity; rather, you can pretend to be the generic, the universal, the generalizable" (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 5). When allies are seen as abstract, universalized individuals they are enabled to speak for the desires of all people. Having no specific identity (as abstraction renders invisible specificities of whiteness, maleness, or straightness), allies can imagine that they might step outside their position and speak from a universal viewpoint.

The dynamics of sameness and difference, and visibility and normalization at work in the larger political culture therefore also generate tensions in ally culture. Neoliberalism has profoundly influenced political movement on a whole, through the encouragement of political engagement through interpersonal interaction. These individual interactions are structured around affect, equating various forms of bad feeling and obscuring the very structural oppressions that necessitate allyship in the first place. My thesis will reveal the ways in which, despite being promoted as an unadulterated good, current allyship serves to reaffirm power and privilege.

Field Site

In order to fully explore the problems of allyship, I chose to focus my research on online spaces: LGBT-ally Tumblr blogs, the video project It Gets Better, and the dialogue around the Macklemore song “Same Love.” Rather than pointing to the

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specific culture created on Tumblr or It Gets Better, I attempt to point to a culture of allyship that runs throughout my research, and often into other spaces of activism.

Using online sources gave me access to a greater breadth of opinions, as in online spaces people may feel more able to express divergent and often inflammatory attitudes. Although such conversations may be seen as unimportant because they are taking place online and usually between strangers, my fieldwork shows that they demonstrate important political processes and social realities (see Boellstorff 2008, Muller 2011). My fieldsite encompassed multiple spheres of allyship: nonprofit organizations, public representation, and discursive communities, each of which I illustrate through a chosen highly trafficked and relevant example.

One space in which such ally discourse has been increasingly common is the social networking website Tumblr. Tumblr was founded in February 2007 by David Karp, and, as of April 2014, encompasses over 179 million blogs and over 82 billion posts\(^5\). These blogs and posts range broadly; for this research, I focused on two Tumblrs that occupy completely opposing spaces as related to allies. The first, “LGBT Laughs,” is a Tumblr that originated as a comedic space on January 19, 2010, but gradually shifted to become more political. It is very critical of straight, cisgender people, including allies. “Straight Voices,” on the other hand, prioritizes allies and their opinions, and serves as a space for ally-positive LGBT commentary, as it has since its inception on August 31, 2013.

Although both sites may seem rather extreme in their positions, they serve the crucial purpose of pulling together a stream of opinions that illustrate a larger position. I hesitate to call these positions pro-ally and anti-ally, because this would be

\(^{5}\) Available on Tumblr “About” page: http://www.tumblr.com/about
an oversimplification that denies the multiplicity in formations of allyship. Instead, I understand Straight Voices as ally-centric and LGBT Laughs as ally-critical; the former focuses on allies over LGBT people, and the latter is intensely critical of allies.

Tumblr is a compiled blog: the posts are not one person’s opinion, but rather the blog’s moderator compiles from a range of other people, with the possibility of additional commentary. This may mean that the comments chosen point to a more extreme divide than actually exists, due to their hand selected nature. Still, the divergence between positions illustrates an overarching process occurring in ally-LGBT relations on the site and in the United States more generally. Although I reference other Tumbrls and blogs, these two sites, LGBT Laughs and Straight Voices, were the main focus of my research, supplemented by other commentary on allyship and related topics.

One primary site of this other commentary is the public conversation around the song “Same Love,” by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis. The song, released on July 18, 2012, outlines white, straight hip hop artist Macklemore's experiences with gayness, in terms of his childhood perceptions and his opinions about equality, all framed by a message of freedom and similarity. A centerpiece in marriage equality campaigning, the song has often been presented as a boon for the LGBT movement, due to its ability to create greater visibility for LGBT issues and to present support as something that everyone can and should do. In alignment with ally culture in general, the song’s reception tends to ignore the politics of its popularity, in terms of the visibility of a straight man as the hip hop voice of LGB people. In this way, I draw on
the online debate between those critical of and those supportive of Macklemore and “Same Love” in order to explore the ideal of visibility as political tool through a neoliberal framework.

My third, and least used, fieldsite is the It Gets Better Project, which is a more organized call for allyship: It Gets Better is an online video project that collects videos revolving around the message, directed toward LGBT teenagers, that life will be better than it is in high school, and to show that there exist people who understand. The site was initially sparked by a number of suicides of LGBT youth, and therefore attempts to speak back to LGBT bullying and isolation. Anyone can create and then submit a video, but certain videos are more popular and thus are given a higher profile within the Project’s website. Dan Savage, the Project’s founder, imagined the site as a bridge between generations and an opportunity to directly address LGBT youth (Goltz 2013). The Project has also been criticized as politically passive since it focuses on the future and on waiting, rather than on change now.

Tumblr, “Same Love,” and It Gets Better occupy very different positions as related to ally culture, but all three are important locations where the politics of allyship and ally culture are created, debated, and reproduced. The discourse on Tumblr, as well as surrounding the It Gets Better Project and “Same Love,” reveals ongoing debates about the positions that allies occupy, the appropriate ways for allies and LGBT people to interact, and the ideal involvement of allies in LGBT movements. Analyzing these sites opens up deeper ideologies of individuality, affective policing, and the reaffirmation of ally privilege that underlie a discourse of niceness and ally support.
Chapter Outline

Chapter 1, “How to be an Ally,” begins by drawing out the various overlapping models of allyship. These models rely upon straight, cisgender people being nice, supportive, and understanding. Allyship can also extend into the inclusion of allies in LGBT community, and the perception of ally as an identity. Ally as identity creates a personal attachment to the label, and to understanding oneself as progressive and “good” due to this allyship, which is self-defined and should not be challenged. The chapter ends by examining the ways in which allyship as a self-understanding comes into conflict with LGBT critiques of some definitions of allyship and of more specific ally actions.

The next chapter, “Fighting Fire with Fire,” takes up these critiques and the reactions that allies have to them. It draws out the tensions that are normally masked by niceness rhetoric. Affective tension, between negativity (anger and “hate”) and positivity (respectability and niceness) allows for ally-LGBT discourse to descend into “tone policing,” or arguments about how people express themselves that regulate affect rather than engaging with political discourse or action. Tone policing also relies upon sameness rhetoric that insists that, as unique individuals, we should not be judged by our group affiliations, but rather all be treated equally.

The final chapter, “Affect and Oppression,” brings the tensions of chapter 2 to bear on larger structural processes. Allies, I demonstrate, reaffirm and reproduce their own privilege as they enact allyship. Allies foreground their own voices on the backs of LGBT oppression and voicelessness. This is excused due to the helpful impulses of
allyship, allowing for the intent of allyship to, again, overrule its negative effects. The denial and individualization of privilege allows for allies to insist upon their own inclusion and the legitimacy of their positioning within LGBT communities and activism, despite the failures of positive affect, visibility, and tolerance as political strategies.

Overall, *Queer Killjoys* argues that current cultures of allyship are often unhelpful, or even detrimental, to the needs and desires of many LGBT people. The conflicts between allies and LGBT people are often much less visible than a narrative of grateful LGBT people entering into normativity (ushered along by allies, perhaps). I aim to pay careful ethnographic attention to the critiques and conflicts generated in interactions between allies and LGBT people, so as to read the ways in which affective codes of niceness, political goals of respectability or inclusion, and pleas for tolerance or reciprocity are both connected to broader dynamics of neoliberal US political culture, and displace or obscure the very particular problems that LGBT allyship aims to remedy.
Chapter 1:  
How to be an Ally

In part because the definition of "ally" is constantly debated and in flux, it is much simpler to find stated “rules” of allyship, or how not to be an ally, than to find a specific definition of allyship. The key question in these rules is whether or not privilege is central to allyship, an issue that opens into questions of who has the ability to define allyship and how the ally should be positioned relative to the LGBT community at large.

One list, originally from a “Pride at Work” organization and reposted on Straight Voices, gives a standard set of behaviors and traits of allies:

**Being a Straight Ally - A Straight Ally strives to...**

- be a friend
- be a listener
- be open-minded
- have his or her own opinions
- be willing to talk
- commit him or herself to personal growth in spite of the discomfort it may sometimes cause
- recognize his or her personal boundaries
- recognize when to refer an individual to additional resources
- confront his or her own prejudices
- join others with a common purpose
- believe that all persons regardless of age, sex, race, gender, religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation should be treated with dignity and respect
- engage in the process of developing a culture free of homophobia and heterosexism
- recognize his or her mistakes, but not use them as an excuse for inaction
- be responsible for empowering his or her role in a community, particularly as it relates to responding to homophobia
- recognize the legal powers and privileges that heterosexuals have and which GLBT people are denied
• support the Ally program of his or her university or workplace
(StraightVoices, Galax-e: Pride at Work) 

This post is additionally tagged with “Same Love,” “Acceptance,” and “Gay Marriage,” amongst other words and phrases that demonstrate this to be a more normative and understanding view of allyship. It relies upon understandings of ally as accepting and ally as supportive, largely affective claims invoking tolerance, rather than calls to action. This list is also somewhat vague and open to interpretation by allies themselves, thereby not challenging their ally position as long as they can see their own beliefs or actions in the list.

A more critical segment of opinions on allies, often displayed on slightly more radical Tumblrs run by LGBT people, is demonstrated in the following list of "notes for allies on this blog," posted on LGBT Laughs. The specificity of this title acknowledges that different LGBT people have varied expectations of and desires for ally behavior (as does item 13 on the list) and so only addresses allies in a particular space.

1. this blog is not about you
2. it's not about your feelings or making you feel ~included~
3. you can follow, like, reblog, submit or whatever
4. but this blog is for lgbtq people
5. you hold privilege and power over us so you are going to be the butt of jokes (crap jokes, angry jokes, silly jokes, scathing witty jokes)

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6 Originally available on the site GALAXe: Pride at Work, “Being a Straight Ally”

7 I will not alter the grammar or spelling of these quotes, in order to preserve their original style. Quotes from Tumblr will be cited by site on which I found them, and by their original author. These authors will be identified by their Tumblr usernames, as the original posts are public, and I wish to attribute work to its originators.

Additionally, I cannot know that the posters I identify as LGBT are LGBT, but from the ways in which they position themselves, thorough use of words like “I” and “we” and the tones taken, I will be assuming that they do identify as LGBT.

8 On Tumblr, tags are phrases that appear as a list below a post and can be used to search an entire blog, or Tumblr in general, for certain words or phrases that have been used to mark various posts
6. i do not give a single care for your ally feelings
7. so messaging me is pointless i’m just going to sass you
8. if you think this blog is hostile to allies then HAHA welcome to how lgbtq people feel on 95% of the internet and in 99% of the offline world
9. anti-ally sentiment hurts your feelings
10. anti-lgbtq sentiment gets us actually hurt
11. no lgbtq person owes you niceness or gratitude for meeting a minimum requirement for basic human decency
12. if you want a blog that’s nicer to allies there are plenty that will give you cookies and kiss your feet for being such a brave ally
13. if you’re a lgbtq person and you disagree with me that’s your right
14. but i also don’t care - you can deal with allies however you see fit, but this is my blog so ner ner ner ner ner (LGBTLaughs, moderator post)

This list aims to counter the foregrounding of ally needs and feelings and instead make explicit that this blog is a space prioritizing LGBT people, even to the possible exclusion of allies. It advocates the position that part of the job of allies is to put up with certain behaviors by LGBT people- indeed, if the ally recognizes their structural position as an oppressor despite their own desire for this not to be so, they must accept the criticism the blog offers. The “notes for allies” are, in Sara Ahmed’s terms, a refusal to “go along with” allyship: “maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies ‘go along with it.’ To refuse to go along with it, to refuse the place in which you are placed, is to be seen as causing trouble, as making others uncomfortable” (Ahmed 2010b, 68-69). In this way, these rules work as a counter to a number of the types of allyship (on Straight Voices, for example), in which allies seek to group themselves with and amongst LGBT people. Later in this chapter, I will analyze this debate between ally-centric and ally-critical model of allyship in terms of engagement with affect and individualism, but first a more basic yet difficult question must be addressed: What is an ally?
The word ally, at its most simple and as related to the LGBT community, is often defined as a supporter of equal rights for people of gender and sexual minorities. However, more in depth definitions often include issues of relative privilege, oppression, and how allies should go about supporting equal rights. Models of allyship range from tolerance, as theorized by Wendy Brown, to active participation, bringing ideas of community and inclusion into question. The level of effort that must be contributed before someone is considered an ally varies. Within numerous spaces of interaction between LGBT people and straight, cisgender people, often described by themselves or others as allies, the qualifications for allyship are a contentious issue.

One of the most contended issues of allyship is what, exactly, allies are or allies do. A conflict arises between ally-critical LGBT people and allies, along with ally-sympathetic LGBT people, due to varied definitions of allyship. The desire of allies to be seen as “good” or as “nice,” and to interact with LGBT people as such, deeply informs their understandings of allyship. However, other models might require more active allyship, and thus reject the bid of some self-defined allies to be accepted as allies by others.

In addition, affect and sentimentality are important motives for and outlets of allyship in various forms. “Our affective states can constrict our political imaginaries,” and allies’ understandings of themselves as enacting certain “affective states” define the actions that they take and the ways in which they relate to LGBT people (Gould 2009 443). Additionally, such affective states can be seen as allyship in and of themselves: Lauren Berlant points to sentimentality as a link “between the
privileged and the socially abject” that is understood to carry political weight and possibility, through an ideal of understanding across social boundaries as counteracting oppression (Berlant 40). If straight, cisgender people can formulate such a connection with LGBT people, this is enacting a kind of sentimental allyship. This baseline emotional link is often coded as niceness, or as decency.

*Being a Decent Person*

There is an understanding of allyship that involves the ally being viewed as a decent person: not necessarily as a good person, or as helpful, but decent. This is highly individual and inactive definition, relying on the core of who a person is rather on than on their actions or relationships. This common interpretation, both vague and simplistic, follows along the lines of this comment from Straight Voices:

**How to be a great ally:**
Be a fucking decent human being.
That’s it, that’s the secret to being a great ally.
*Whispers* Now was that so bad? (StraightVoices, vi-kingdeathmarch)

This characterization would claim that everyone who is not being overtly or directly prejudiced or harmful to other people is, in fact, an ally. In the interest of being as widespread as possible, many consider this definition helpful, yet others claim that being decent is not allyship, it is simply not being a horrible person. A lack of overt harm, then, should not be enough to qualify as an ally.

Yet in a discourse of tolerance and diversity, simply allowing difference to exist can be seen as enacting equality. Brown’s tolerant individual, who shares a great deal with the “decent human being,” is one who espouses certain liberal views that also allow one to feel superior to others, who are intolerant and “bad,” while
simultaneously being largely apolitical. As Jane Ward claims, “respect for diversity has become a centerpiece of American culture and citizenship, and… those who do not respect diversity are the new villains in the morality tale of equality” (Ward 2008 1). Similarly, in discourse about allyship, if someone can be respectful and tolerant, they are not the villain: thus, they become an ally.

**Being Accepting**

Once one is decent, this trait is often expanded into acceptance. Acceptance goes beyond simple tolerance and into actually accepting difference. The ideal of acceptance emerges from a viewpoint that prioritizes individual mindsets, in which a potential ally comes to understand difference and through this can come to accept others:

> Give people a chance. Show people who you are. Let them understand. Unless you open up and allow for others to feel safe enough to ask questions and understand who you are and your community, we’re never going to get equality for every people and community. Understanding is the first step to equality. (StraightVoices, zoefightsdragons)

The prioritization of understanding also relies upon LGBT people making themselves available to be understood and thus accepted. Andrea Smith writes that “Anti-racist intellectual and political projects are often premised on the notion that if people knew us better, we too would be granted humanity,” and the same premise often applies to LGBT movement (Smith 2013). Understanding is the first step, or even the entirety, of a shift towards equality.

However, even with this possibility of empathy, such understanding can never be complete. Therefore, accepting difference does not necessarily entail reacting to it
appropriately or really comprehending what this difference means in someone else’s daily life. Trying is the most important thing to this form of ally: allyship is about intent, not effect. The key to allyship, then, is again the sentimental, affective connection discussed by Berlant, rather than the outcomes of this connection.

Acceptance is often seen to be about niceness, and thus as an emotional state; it is about motivations. For instance, Macklemore, according to many, should be forgiven any mistakes or negative outcomes of his actions, namely his song “Same Love,” because he has good intentions. As carpoolintohell observes, “he has a lot of raps about the fact that he’s imperfect, but he tries” (StraightVoices, carpoolintohell). Trying is enough for him to be received by many as a good ally, regardless of consequences.

Additionally, if the acceptance promoted by allyship is not conditional, but rather a character trait one might direct towards all those with different opinions or identities, acceptance can extend to both LGBT people and those with religious objections to LGBT identities. Often the ideal of being understanding is directionless, meaning that there is a push to equally accept all differences of opinion or identity, and equating, for instance, religious beliefs and LGBT identities, even when the two stand in opposition.

This ideal of universal respect can be counterproductive to a more active form of allyship, however, as many LGBT people, such as pyramidslayer, point out:

LOL [laugh out loud] THE WHOLE POINT OF HAVING ALLIES IS FOR THEM TO TELL OFF PEOPLE IN THEIR CIRCLES FOR BEING FUCKING PHOBES, IF YOU’RE GONNA “RESPECT THE OPINIONS OF HOMOPHOBES/TRANSPHOBES/etc” YOU ARE LITERALLY WORSE THAN USELESS (LGBTLaughs, pyramidslayer)
In contrast with this comment, the acceptance model of allyship can also be connected to a more relational form, extending beyond simple personal feelings of acceptance and into the more active support.

**Supporting Others**

A still more active definition of allyship involves actual support. Yet “support,” like “ally,” is a vague term open to a range of interpretations.

**LGBT History Month 13th definition: Ally**

Someone who advocates for and supports members of a community other than their own. Reaching across differences to achieve mutual goals. When we use it in regard to the LGBTQIA Community we are talking about those who support the letters they are not. Like a straight person who supports the LGBTQIA and so on community or a Lesbian who supports the Bi community or a Gay person who supports straight allies, they are all allies.

Allies are very important, they are often speak out for others rights and are a big part of the Gay Rights Movement (Straight Voices, theyaoiaddictionsociety)

This definition fails to mention any power differential or directionality in support. Anyone who supports someone of an identity other than their own is an ally. One can even be an ally to allies: support in and of itself is the defining characteristic of allyship.

The It Gets Better Project similarly gestures to everyone who wishes to help bullied LGBT youth as support: straight teenagers, LGBT adults, or any number of other groups. Defining alliance through support of such a specific subsection of (particularly sympathetic) people, LGBT youth, might obscure the ways youth bullying is connected to other systems of power, and that a LGBT adult has a very different stake in this issue than does a cisgender, heterosexual adult.
These definitions and mobilizations of allyship point to difference, not to hierarchy, between the LGBT community and its allies. If the term includes support for those with more social power, as in support of allies by gay people, what can allyship even mean? Support can be anything from a parent supporting their LGBT child specifically to a celebrity endorsing LGBT rights. Monetary contributions, such as donations to the It Gets Better project, participation in rallies, or changing one’s Facebook profile picture to a marriage equality symbol, are all considered support. Support of LGBT political goals is one of the most common iterations of support, but these political goals are usually defined as those of the mainstream LGBT movement. Political support then necessitates voting in certain ways or vocalizing supportive opinions on LGBT equality. The wide range of potential meanings cause the tenet of support to be both the most common definition of allyship that I have come across and also the most contradictory. The problem with support more generally is that it lacks a concrete meaning and does not necessitate any particular accomplishments: it can be affective or active. As theorist Erika Feigenbaum more personally notes, “in my interpersonal life, the expressed feelings of hetero allies, ranging from disappointment to outrage, have been clear; less visible are actual steps these political allies have taken toward political engagement” (Feigenbaum 2007, 2). Instead of active political engagement, affective engagement interacts with difference through tolerance and an abstract ideal of understanding and emotional support; decency, acceptance, and support, as models of allyship, all frequently remain entirely within the realm of affect.
**A is for Ally**

Perhaps the most dramatic understanding of allyship entails full and equal membership in the LGBT community. This conceptualization shifts the definition of allyship away from connection (as motivated outside), and instead codes it as another way of being part of the same community. This notion both strains the very conceptual base of “ally” and, interestingly, understands allyship as an identity, akin to gay or lesbian.

For example, although LGBT is a commonly used acronym to describe this community, there are a number of other options: LGBTQA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Asexual) to QUILTBAG (Queer, Undecided, Intersex, Lesbian, Transgender, Bisexual, Asexual, Gay) and more. Each letter in the acronyms denotes membership and equal inclusion in the group. However, a number of these letters are contested or multiple; for instance, “Q” can be read as “Queer” or as “Questioning.” The letter A, though, moves beyond a simple multiplicity of meanings and into an outright debate: does it stand for Asexual or for Ally?

It is obvious which side of this divide I come down on from my interpretation above. There are people who read it as each one of these possibilities, or who would say that A stands for Asexual/Ally. There is no "real" answer to this question; instead, the debate itself says something important about expectations of inclusion under the “umbrella” of LGBT… that cisgender, heterosexual allies often have. Ideals of representation and inclusion are mobilized by both allies who claim the letter (asserting that everyone should be represented by the acronym, including them) and
by LGBT people who do not see A as Ally (who typically pursue more minoritarian understandings of LGBT community).

Inclusion of allies in the acronym would both legitimate their position outside of normative, privileged straight and cisgender identities and would legitimate ally as a concrete identity to be held. This is part of continued “battles over identity and naming (who I am, who we are). Which words capture us and when do words fail us? Words, and the "us" they name, seem to be in critical flux” (Gamson 1995 397).

Allies do not just wish to be included in the acronym, but also as an identity and in the “us” the acronym names.

The desire of allies to be included in the acronym is often understood to contain the potential to overwhelm the community as a whole. For example, the sarcastic comments on LGBTLaughs:

actually im pretty sure that all the letters in LGBTQA should stand for ally. Little ally, gangster ally, big ally, train-conductor ally, questioning-if-theyre-an-ally and the Allies themselves. we need more ally representation (dx11, LGBT Laughs)

what do you mean LGBTA doesn’t stand for Loving Gentle Brilliant Tremendous Ally (LGBTLaughs, brokebackhills)

In this vision of allies in the acronym, the inclusion of allies comes at the expense of the inclusion of LGBT people, not just in addition to it, one of the main problems people have with this idea of allyship as membership. Due to the invisibility of normative identities, allies are not accustomed to being excluded due to their straight or cisgender identity. These identities are not relevant, in the eyes of most allies, to their social interactions. Yet suddenly, in the situation of their allied relationship, these identities become both relevant and less recognized.
Furthermore, there is some basic conceptual confusion that the debate around ally inclusion references, since the term "ally" directly means that one is separate from, but supportive of, the LGBT community. It is, in other words, a relational position that relies upon the presence of a separate LGBT group for its existence. However, this separation is often obscured, even to the point where straight and cisgender people can see themselves as members of the LGBT community— even without the overt inclusion of the title “ally”:

I don’t consider myself an “ally” of the LGBT movement.

To be an ally means to be separate, to be different, and to some people to be somehow less than the members of a group.

So I am straight, but I am not an ALLY I am a MEMBER of the movement because I work towards equality in EXACTLY the same manner as anyone else does. I am not DIFFERENT than you I am not LESS I am not GREEDY I am not SELFISH I am not working PARALLEL I am working WITH YOU. The movement is a TEAM where no sections (not the L, Not the B, nor the G, or the T or even the others not included in the name such as asexuals or pansexuals) are better or more worthy of representation than the others so we work AS A TEAM. By making straight people out to be this malignant tumor hanging off the side of the movement and spending so much time deriding their participation in a way makes you no better than the people who once derided white people for believing in and being a part of the Civil Rights movement you show that you think that we are SCUM and UNWORTHY….

(StraightVoices, unrepentantprophecy-deactivated)

Allies do not wish to accept that their own participation in the LGBT social movement may be different that the work of LGBT people because this goes against neoliberal ideals of individualism and abstract equality. Separation from LGBT community, in this case even through the title of “ally,” can then be perceived as a discriminatory exclusion on the basis of sexuality or gender, the very process that most allies see LGBT rights politics as fighting against.
Certified Allyship

Perhaps the most basic divide in these understandings of allyship is between “ally” as verb and noun. In other words, it is a question of whether allyship is relational or individual, an action or an identity. “Ally,” especially in the era of identity politics, has often come to be seen as more than a relational term, and rather as a personal label that one can bestow upon oneself. Joshua Gamson discusses identity as a way to construct group boundaries, and identity politics as utilizing an essentialist ideology that insists that one must be allowed to actualize the self in its individual and self-defined identity (1995). Identity, then, is something innate and internal that can be declared on one’s own and should not be challenged by outside opinions.

Identity politics are often critiqued failing to grasp the intersectionality of oppressions. The gay movement, for instance, has faltered in its focus on people who are gay and black or gay and working class (see Gamson 1995, Cohen 1997). Duggan claims that “Identity politics, in the contemporary sense of the rights-claiming focus of balkanized groups organized to pressure the legal and electoral systems for inclusion and redress, appeared out of the field of disintegrating social movements” (Duggan 2003, XVIII). They aim for a very specific type of rights, and indicate, in this view, the loss of true social movement. Yet identities can also work to bring a group together; for this reason, they appear as “necessary stumbling blocks” in Judith Butler’s queer critique of identity (Butler and Salih 2003 see also, Anzaldúa 1987, Johnson 2012).
If this doubleness applies to gay/lesbian (or queer) identity, what then, occurs when allyship becomes such a label and a tool of self-understanding?

Identifying as an ally becomes especially possible due to the invisibility of cisgender and heterosexual positionalities, which are so normalized as to barely be considered identities, as indicated by Michael Kimmel: "To be white, or straight, or male, or middle class is to be simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible. You're everywhere you look, you're the standard against which everyone else is measured" (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 3). If being straight or cisgender is not seen as the identity of allies, or at least not as the most relevant identities, allyship itself can come to be understood as an identity.

First, "ally" is understood as something that a person can self-define as, rather than as something that would be defined by those one is supposedly allied to or as a more situational term that depends upon actions in a specific moment. Producing "ally" as an identity category allows for any challenge to this category to be perceived as an attack on an identity, rather than as a critique of one’s actions.

Ally as identity also allows for allies to discursively center themselves, despite pushback against ally as an identity, some of it very unambiguous:

ally is not an identity category
ally has never been an identity category
ally will never be an identity category
at best it’s something you choose to live into daily without expecting accolades
at worst it’s a fiction invented to recenter discourse around the “good” members of an oppressive class rather than on the marginalized and the systems that marginalize them
fuck ally week (LGBTLaughs, anachronizomai)
The ally identity can also, as this commenter points out, serve to focus attention on “members of an oppressive class” who are involved in LGBT movements and politics. In this way, the creation of allyship as identity is what enables allies to serve as spokespeople or voices of the movement. One of the most dramatic views of allyship is that an ally should speak for LGBT people, publicizing LGBT issues. In a political model that emphasizes public visibility, as the current mainstream movement does, increasing the number of people who are speaking to others about LGBT rights seems a clear cut tactic towards greater equality. Therefore, speaking on behalf of LGBT people, especially to other straight, cisgender people, is often seen as one of the chief roles, and even definers, of allyship.

Within this idea of ally as identity, allies can feel comfortable coopting certain identity based terms and narratives, such as coming out. Usually an important descriptor in American understandings of LGBT lives, “coming out” serves as entrance into an identity, and also allows for public recognition and entrance into a community. However, when used by allies, "coming out" serves to reinforce allyship as individualized and as emerging from within, rather than as relational. For instance, on National Coming Out Day, Straight Voices reblogged a post from someone "coming out" as an ally and a Christian (StraightVoices, sweetbabyrhay). This redirects attention away from LGBT people’s identities and struggles, and onto the normative identities of someone who is straight, while also granting them a platform to declare their own allyship as an identity. Rather than a choice or something continually enacted, allyship becomes an innate and individual trait to be personally
professed without any necessary lived experience or agreement from those one is supposedly allied to.

Coming out as ally is a way to produce certain kinds of selves: progressive and giving, yet also clearly normative in many ways. There is often an affirmation of one’s identity, but not just as a straight, cisgender person. Instead, coming out as ally produces oneself (and one’s own straightness) as a “good,” unprejudiced person: as Feigenbaum writes, “by attempting to sell average Joes and Janes on a progressive political position, both of these strategies reinforce Joe's and Jane's unspoken dominance as a "nice couple."” (Feigenbaum 2007, 3). Coming out as ally, or otherwise identifying as an ally, allows for allies to believe that they that connect with LGBT issues in ways that other people may not, and are therefore “nice,” and “good.”

This perception of allyship is often satirized, through language about being a “certified ally” or a “card-holding ally.”

Note: All fundamental rights and privileges to ALL ally cards in good standing** remain intact unless otherwise noted in the above announcement. Including:

- The right to go without critique and call out from said allied community.
- The right to present ally card membership in response to critiques and call outs from said allied community.
- The right to feel appreciated for ally membership by allied community and to feel excused of all past actions and future mistakes.
- The right to celebratory rewards and praises for major changes in society and policy that benefit your allied community.
- The right to stop learning about and from allied community.
• The right to consume the culture and cultural artifacts of allied community at will and to occupy as much space in their claimed spaces and neighborhoods as desired.

• The right to engage in sexual and romantic relations with members of allied community without accusations of fetisization or exoticization.

**See the rules and regulations on the back of your ally card or at www.dodi.gov for details on specific requirements and fees to qualify for and maintain good standing membership of specific ally cards.

This announcement is satirical. No such governing division of the United States exists. (LGBTLaughs, Jamariking)

With the possibility of "ally" as identity rather than as relational position, overt membership in the LGBT community is often desired or assumed. When this happens being included in LGBT events and community is seen as another marker of being a “good” straight, cisgender person.

Creating "ally" as a static identity category makes any critique into a challenge of someone's identity. When allies are defined as supporters, critiques become a challenge to one’s fundamental identity, to something that defines the ally as a person. Ally as identity, then, also produces the discursive anxiety and hyper-dramatic arguments that do not just engage political ideas, but also people’s self-understandings, and therefore motivates highly affective responses to opposition, to which I now turn.

**Have a Cookie**

Despite the understanding of allyship as identity, unchallengeable by others, it is still seen as chosen by the allies themselves; therefore, an ally can withdraw their
allyship. Recognizing allies, even being grateful to allies, is consequently understood as necessary in order to retain their crucial support. Further, allies do not expect their allyship to be merely tolerated, as Brown notes, but rather to be actively desired and rewarded. For example:

some
idiot
in the macklemore tag is hating on him for supporting lgbt rights because he’s making such a profit off of his song same love
wtf [what the fuck] that doesn’t even make sense
and also people from the lgbt community should be fucking grateful that a celebrity like him and many others are openly supporting their cause because darlings they don’t or we don’t even have too. (StraightVoices, hist8ry)

Amongst the many other times that this comment was reblogged, argentarachnids added: "But we should be grateful. Groveling at the feet of the straight person who takes the time to consider us."

These comments expand the ideas of visibility and responsibility, as I have been discussing, but along a particularly affective line- in terms of whose responsibility it is to fix an unequal system, and what sorts of emotional politics might be used to justify involvement. It is as if current allies are a step removed from this system, and can be either neutrally uninvolved or helpfully allies, and thus can decide to be allies out of the goodness of their own hearts. Historically, as Gould’s ethnography of the early days of ACT UP shows, such a sense of responsibility impacted gay activism in the 1980s. She writes, “the trope of responsibility, then, played into the shame-imbued idea that gays, somehow undeserving, had to be ‘good’
in order to get a proper response to the AIDS crisis from state and society” (Gould 2009, 89). Although no longer in this moment of crisis, the idea that LGBT people must be “good” in order to “deserve” political support continues.

This state of emotional hostage has encouraged some allies to insist that they must be treated nicely or else they will withdraw their support. This necessitates a certain level of exchange in which LGBT people, having nothing to offer but gratitude, are in a weak, supplicant-like position. They must, then, acquiesce to the demands for gratitude, support, and reward if they wish to retain their allies, a process that will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Such repayment can come in the form of gratitude, an emotional repayment, or in the form of symbolic capital: having a “gay friend” that makes one’s opinions valid or that provides proof of one’s progressive politics. As Kimmel points out, "when presented with evidence of systematic discrimination… the more defensive among [straight interviewees] immediately mention several fact that they believe will absolve them of inclusion in the superordinate category," one of which is "I have a gay friend" (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 2).

On rare occasions, especially for famous allies, financial compensation for their allyship becomes possible, such as if they make money from their music or art about LGBT issues or gain LGBT fan bases from it.

However, the most common form of payment that I have come across is emotional. The idea of gratefulness emerges from two basic concepts: first, that allies are offering their support selflessly and do not have a responsibility to help, and second, that LGBT people therefore owe these helpers some kind of repayment, even
if only emotional. The idea of repayment further morphs into a demand for recognition, with calls for Ally Weeks, visibility campaigns, Ally flags, and the previously mentioned inclusion in LGBT extended acronyms. These are partially coded as support for allies, and therefore to some degree for LGBT rights, and partially as thanks and repayment for ally work. In all, they articulate ally as an identity deserving of public recognition.

This demand for recognition and repayment is often legitimated, in the eyes of allies, by the wide presence of recognition based tactics for LGBT people:

So the gays get pride days and bis get visibility day but what do straight people get? nothing, not even a thank you for their help in making those days possible. I say tumblr gets over its heterophobia and we have a straight visibility day to recognize allies for all they’ve done who’s with me. *(Straight Voices, ignitevale)*

As this comment demonstrates, desire that LGBT people feel and express gratefulness toward allies can morph into claims that allies deserve “equal” recognition; if not, they might feel slighted or unrecognized. Not only should LGBT people be grateful, they should proclaim this gratefulness to the world and focus their energy into lauding allies. This redirects energy from LGBT needs to ally needs, again asking LGBT people to expend their energy supporting the very people whose expressed purpose in the movement, as allies, is to provide support:

Yes

Keep spewing hatred towards your most valuable assets

*That will definitely get us equality* *(Straight Voices, king-of-the-woodland-fandoms)*

Calling allies the "most valuable assets" of the LGBT movement creates the illusion that keeping allies happy is a more important goal than expressing the needs of LGBT
people, or correcting the frequently problematic actions and opinions of allies and
other straight, cisgender people who could be potential allies.

Within this narrative, allies can come to be seen almost more important to
LGBT rights than actual LGBT people are. The need for validation, however, comes
to seem like a threat: "allies are so weird because like they say they’re in full support
of defending lgbtqa rights but as soon as one word is spoken against them they adopt
a frankly terrifying standpoint of “without us you are nothing”" (LGBTLaughs, skoloton).

As this quote makes clear, there are varied responses to these demands for
recognition or gratitude. A common response to this process of expecting recognition
is the question “Do you want a cookie?”

This line suggests that niceness, when it is encoded as being a decent person
(the most passive form of allyship), is not enough. “Here’s your cookie” is a nod
toward a typical expression making fun of the trope of gratitude and reward: “Do you
want a cookie?” In other words, do you expect to be gifted things for being a decent
person? There are pictures on a number of Tumblrs of decorated chocolate chip
cookies frosted to say phrases such as “has a gay friend,” “not a racist,” or “meets
minimum standards of decent human” with the sarcastically italicized “Good for you.
Want a cookie?” as a subtitle. This is followed by the commentary “For use on people
who expect cookies/kudos for being a decent human being” (LGBTLaughs, homoarigato). This phrase makes fun of the idea that recognition or reward are
expected for being an ally, or at least the version of allyship that simply involves
decency. It points to the ways in which allies are often hungry for something to
legitimate their allyship— even if it is only a social boost for seeming progressive or receiving the approval of other people. Still, the deep irony of allies demanding the support, recognition, and emotional labor of LGBT people as a mode of political engagement continues, unmarked.
Chapter 2:
Fighting Fire with Fire

As the previous chapter suggested, the desire that allies have for legitimation is at war with the criticisms that many LGBT people have for their work and their positions. It also comes into conflict due to the intrinsic difference between political models emphasizing tolerance, individuality, and affect, versus those that attempt to pursue wider social transformation. As Brown writes,

> When sensitivity to or even respect for the other is substituted for justice for the other, when historically induced suffering is reduced to ‘difference’ or to a medium of ‘offense,’ when suffering as such is reduced to a problem of personal feeling, then the field of political battle and political transformation is replaced with an agenda of behavioral, attitudinal, and emotional practices. (Brown 2006, 16, my emphasis)

In this chapter, I explore the criticism of tolerance discourse and its depoliticizing agenda in online spaces. What I call ally-critical discourses are frequently perceived as a challenge to ally identities, and as an unnecessary cruelty considering how hard the allies are trying to help. Anger is a common emotion expressed within heated exchange, like those that occur in debates on Tumblr. This anger often comes across clearly in comments critical of ally behavior. Criticisms offer a range of viewpoints, from pointing at specific terms that allies should not use to claiming that allyship in itself is harmful and should be discontinued. Critical commentary also contains a variety of tones, from helpful suggestions to almost violent levels of anger. Such affective moods are highly meaningful; affect is a political tool, with, according to Deborah Gould, both the possibility to restrain and encourage potential responses. Both can, I believe, be seen in discourses of allyship, due to the interaction of what is
usually termed “anger” (among other less socially acceptable emotions) and “tone policing,” or attempts to regulate affect.

In terms of anger and criticism, at the very least many LGBT people fault self-described allies for not doing enough, or believe that the term ally is being too widely applied, especially due to the previously discussed incoherence of its meaning. This inadequacy is often expressed though satirically pointing out what allies are doing in order to, they claim, help LGBT people: "Supporting gay and other strange people is hard work. You sometimes have to change your picture on website. Sometimes they make you wear a shirt, or button. But in the end, its all worth it to know your changing America" (LGBTLaughs, nachobragers). To be able to describe oneself as an ally for completing these tasks and then move on with one's life without thinking about it goes against the deeper meaning of allyship as continuing support, rather than insubstantial and showy support that lacks real results.

In a more scathing critique, an anonymous follower of the blog wrote into LGBT Laughs, "it's ally week at my school and we're supposed to fill out index cards with the answer to 'Why is it important to be an ally? and What does it mean to be an ally?' How can I tell them that allies can sit down and shut up?" The response was:

you could go full snarky:

why is important to be an ally?:

- "Because I think gay rights are human rights! Straight but not narrow! Gay is the new black! We're here, we're (basically) queer! It bums me out that my two favourite fictional male characters couldn't get married if they were real. Also some really cool straight celebrities support gay rights. And once we get gay marriage, this fight will be won!"

what does it mean to be an ally?:
"it means that even when i speak over lgbtq people on their own issues, police how they react to oppression and discrimination, mess up, get things wrong or use my straight and/or cis privilege to do harm to them, i’ll get praise for trying anyway! also being an ally means i’ll never have to examine my own behaviour again because i’m a certified good person™, and everything i do is a good thing. gay people couldn’t do it without me, therefore i can be as bad at allyship as i want and they’ll just have to put up with it. i will never have to bother reading all the information on lgbtq issues there is available, because i’m no longer responsible for my own education on lgbtq issues; since it’s the job of an oppressed group to spend all day living it and all night explaining it to me, i can just sit back and be a top-notch ally by wearing purple, taping my mouth shut, and outing my friends for the greater good :)

if that won’t fit you could just write “good, effective allies don’t feel the need to claim the title of ‘ally’ or have a designated week for their allyship” on the index card (LGBTLaughs, moderator post)

This writer critiques many of the common practices of ally culture, including using allyship as a way of professing one’s own identity and decency, the use of sameness rhetoric, speaking over LGBT people, and refusing criticism. This chapter explores these critiques in terms of both affective and political tensions.

The conflict between niceness and critique becomes apparent in this discourse, which we might understand as an affective tension between respectability and negativity, written about by Gould. “Heteronormativity makes feelings such as anger among lesbians, gay men, and other sexual and gender outlaws both likely and unacceptable” (Gould 2009, 92). Displaying anger is undesirable and does not fit into a model of respectability politics. Similarly, Wendy Brown critiques the depoliticizing effects of tolerance discourse, where "historically induced suffering is reduced to 'difference" (Brown 2006, 16). Difference becomes diversity, which, Ward writes, " has… become a discursive tool that affords individuals and groups an opportunity to uncritically disavow inequality in general, and their own gender, racial, and economic privileges in particular" (Ward 2008, 139). Within this model, we are
all different people- but not because of our unequal social positions. Thus, we can all be the same in our difference. Both of these dynamics – treating anger as unacceptable and the emphasis on diversity as safe difference – are depoliticizing; both rely on the neoliberal political formations that promote tolerance and respectability.

**Respectability Politics and Anger**

As I’ve described, homonormative LGBT movement is focused on gaining acceptance by presenting LGBT people as normal and respectable. What critics call “respectable queerness” often, as Yuvraj Joshi writes, “suggests that the newfound public recognition of gay people and relationships is contingent upon their acquiring a respectable social identity… Never before, however, has respectability been more salient in queer politics than at this moment of recognition” (Joshi 2012, 416). As Joshi continues,

Respectability… connotes acceptance of the norm. To be respectable is to follow a normative standard of behavior in public, while being aware of continual evaluations against that standard. The onus here is not on others to accept difference (as is the case with respect), but rather on oneself to cease to be unacceptably different. Moreover, at the same time as identifying with the norm, respectability entails differentiating oneself from others who fall outside the norm. (Joshi 2012, 418)

In this moment of respectability politics, negativity, anger or criticism can lead to recriminations even from other LGBT people, who claim that more critical queers are presenting an unsympathetic image of their community, imagined as a single coherent item. Because the onus is on LGBT people to be normative and acceptable, those who...
make more critical comments come to be seen as angry critics who are “[ruining] everything.”

As if it isn’t hard enough dealing with homophobic and/or transphobic assholes all day, we now have to deal with other people hating us because of you. Thanks. Thanks a fucking lot for making things more difficult than they already were, making the rest of the community hate us… how about BE HAPPY that we’re finally getting our equal rights? But no, that’s too simple, isn’t it? Just fucking ridiculous. Instead of celebrating and being happy, you just have to ruin everything.

I just don’t get people. I just don’t get why we can never accept something good and have to ruin it for everyone else. Just what the fuck. (StraightVoices, thefluffyasian)

The use of “we” in this comment reflects the understanding of all LGBT people as sharing some kind of understanding or grouping, with “you” pointing to those who are still negative, and refuse to be happy. As with Ahmed’s “feminist killjoy,” the one person who refuses happiness is perceived as refusing happiness on behalf of everyone. The perception that one person, or a subgroup of people, is capable of "ruining it for everyone" relies upon society perceiving a monolithic gay community, in which the actions of anyone implicated reflect upon the entirety of the community, bringing more homophobia and threatening the forward motion of equal rights.

The respectability politics at the forefront of the LGBT rights movement also pursues assimilationist goals, in an attempt secure respect within the norms set out by current mainstream society. This is part of why allies are seen as necessary to the movement: in order to be part of the norm, one must demonstrate acceptance by normalized people (in this case, allies). In this step, allies are crucial intermediaries who can show that LGBT people can also be respectable. Support from allies and the visibility this support garners is then seen as crucial to achieving respectability and
rights. From this vantage point, criticism of allies (or straight, cisgender people in general) appears both untenable and counterproductive. In this move, those who “fight fire with fire,” who respond to negativity (homophobia or transphobia) with more negativity, seem to be working against LGBT political goals - hurting the movement. Instead, the call for LGBT people is to “turn the other cheek:” to be “nice,” non-judgmental, and understanding.

“Straight Hate”

Even as anger has come to be seen as an unacceptable and politically-suspect emotion, it is also a central form of critique. Commentators on online fora commonly express anger at the heteronormative social system, at people who act in discriminatory manners, at others' expectations, and at the expectation that they take responsibility for the education of straight, cisgender people and for the improvement of their disadvantaged positions. This anger is often articulated in comments directed at generic "straight people" or "cis people." The more extreme comments are ones calling to get rid of these groups: "we’ve invented sprays and traps to get rid of every type of pest except entitled straight people," and many others commenting on how straight people expect to be catered to (LGBTLaughs, queerwashing,).

One of the ways these angry comments are framed is as “hate” speech. Hate is seen as morally unacceptable, as marginalizing allies, and as being unhelpful in combating hate more generally: “Hate doesn’t stop hate” (StraightVoices, carpoolintohell).
THIS MAY COME AS A SHOCK TO SOME PEOPLE, BUT HATE DOESN’T BECOME OKAY JUST BECAUSE YOU’RE THE ONE DOING THE HATING

Seriously, as often as not on this website I see derogatory comments and images made about “white girls”, “cis gendered”, etc. The fact that your group has been, or still is, disenfranchised by the mainstream does not justify hate. Stop widening the wedge the mainstream created between it and the group you identify with. You’re not getting revenge, you’re just being an asshole. (StraightVoices, alwayswanted2bginger)

In this comment, angry comments are seen as unjustified since they might further the marginalization that LGBT people experience. This perception both polices affect in the name of politics, and also universalizes, or flattens all expressions, so that all “hate” has the same politics.

This can be seen in the perception that angry comments might even constitute parallel discrimination: heterophobia. As a mirror image of homophobia, heterophobia is the fear of or prejudice against heterosexual people; cisphobia is similarly invoked as the parallel to transphobia. It is often discussed on Tumblr, but rarely if at all in face to face discussions. The idea of heterophobia imagines that affect – anger – can be understood as oppression, as something greater than an interaction between people and into something more institutionalized. Kimmel points out that with feminist and antiracist critiques,

The invisibility of privilege means that many men, like many white people, become defensive and angry when confronted with the statistical realities or the human consequences of racism or sexism. Since our privilege is invisible, we may become defensive. Indeed, we may even feel like victims ourselves. (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 5)

The same occurs with straight, cisgender people, and even more easily with allies, who see themselves as good subjects. The hurt or perceived victimization on the part

9 Originally larger
of allies is not just a rhetorical device or attempt to retain privilege: many self-described allies genuinely feel like victims, especially since Tumblr consolidates such negativity or criticality in a space that they can see as prejudiced.

There is a general failure to perceive the motivation behind negative commentary: instead of seeing the legitimacy of and even need for such responses, they are interpreted as unnecessary attacks, and even as oppression. Invoking the term "hate" also draws upon the idea of hate speech and crime, something that usually applies only to oppressed minority groups. Like a discourse of colorblindness, "straight hate" takes a very individualizing view, in which interpersonal relationships are the site of politics and discrimination, rather than systematic oppressions. This understanding of hatred as a both individual prejudice and systematic oppression blurs what an LGBT person saying something hateful to a cisgender, heterosexual person might mean.

It is not only allies who refuse anger as a valid mode of political engagement. Even other LGBT people participate in demands for less negativity, with admonishments such as, “You don’t get a free pass to harass people because you’re oppressed. Decent human beings know how to rationally and calmly have a discussion without name calling and jumping to conclusions” (StraightVoices, frickmesheeran). This arguments suggests that anger does not correct behavior, and instead education is the solution to social problems. In this quote, “decency” references a rational mode of engagement, contrasted to anger, and negative emotions in general, which are often coded as useless and irrational.
Given the ideal of the enlightened individual who can deal with problems in a calm manner, based on reason rather than feeling, current paradigms of activism often focus on rationality. "Protesters" should “engage in reasonable, thoughtful, strategic behavior designed to achieve their sensible political goals;" Gould theorizes that this formulation leads to "an evacuation of emotion" from discourse on activism, even if such emotion exists on the ground (Gould 2009, 15). For instance, in Tumblr communities, there are often requests for people to explain criticisms and problems in “rational” rather than emotional language so that the person being critiqued will not feel bad. As feedmechickennuggets writes, “decent human beings know how to rationally and calmly have a discussion without name calling and jumping to conclusions” (StraightVoices). Discourse connecting rationality and decency insists that LGBT people be rational not just to help allies, but to demonstrate their own goodness. Requests to “be calm,” to “treat each other with respect,” or to “stop being an asshole” all point to the value placed on rational exchange over and against more emotional language and criticism. (StraightVoices, srbrez, danganchickens).

Such rationality is imagined as a way in which LGBT can educate allies in order to facilitate their acceptance:

If you want people to understand you better, then yes, you SHOULD educate them. Don’t say it isn’t your job to educate them, if you REALLY want to make yourselves heard and your cause heard, you should be happy to educate people in order to help change their views. To be honest, I would love it if I could learn more about trans* people and their preferred terms, but all I see on here is bitching and namecalling. How are people supposed to learn and WANT to learn, if all you do is attack them? (StraightVoices, feedmechickennuggets)

Proper LGBT behavior, in this comment, entails convincing other people that they want to learn and educating them in the way that that they would be comfortable with.
LOOK, THEY MAY NOT ALWAYS BE THE MOST EDUCATED, BUT THEY STILL WANT TO HELP. If one says something that offends you or is ignorant, you should teach them, not throw them to the curb or yell at them or make fun of them behind their back. Hell this should go for ANYONE. You can’t create change if you aren’t educating people…

I understand that with “allies” sometimes we feel they should know what they’re fighting for, and it can be annoying to have to explain things. I understand. But bashing people who just want to help you (even if they sometimes get on your nerves) doesn’t help any of us….Educate your allies. (StraightVoices, kara-komate).

The idea that someone could call themself an ally without actually being educated on LGBT issues is telling. It is a matter of intent being valued over actions, and of LGBT people being seen as responsible for helping allies in their projects toward self-improvement without hurting their feelings.

However, this task becomes especially difficult when even attempts to educate can be taken as criticism if they are not phrased very carefully, and criticism is often received as if mean spirited and unfounded. Comments that are less directly about putting down straight, cisgender people, and instead are more directed criticisms of privilege or prejudice can also be viewed as hatred, and there is often little perceived separation between insult and criticism. One commenter points out, on the topic of transgender critiques, "i know very few trans people who are actually out to make cis people feel bad for being cis. i know a much larger number of trans people who are out to make cissexist cis people feel bad for being cissexist. there’s a difference" (LGBTLaughs, lookatthisfuckingcisgender). This difference between “hating” cis people and critiquing transphobia is important, yet the more structural dynamics of oppression are often ignored or effaced when such comments are discussed, as will be further discussed in chapter 3. Once something has been deemed
hateful (or “not constructive”) it is typically dismissed as counterproductive by many in these Tumblr communities. Like Ahmed’s feminist killjoy, those pointing out problems can seem to become the problem, disrupting the forms of rational discourse that allow for mutual happiness due to a lack of challenge of this affect. The queer killjoy, in this case, who points out an existing tension is perceived as the creator of the conflict, not just its revealer. The killjoy has disrupted the interpersonal interactions that foreground affect, and instead has engaged with systems of power and oppression in a wider, more generalized domain.

That’s Not Fair

Individuality is one of the main tenets of current political culture. As Bradley Jones and Roopali Mukherjee write, "a central feature of neoliberal discourse is its rejection of the social for an emphasis on the autonomous individual… This extraction of the individual from the social has manifested in the depoliticization and privatization of difference” (Jones and Mukherjee 2010, 407). Individualism helps explain the logic of “reverse discrimination,” in this case heterophobia or cisphobia, in which true equality is treating everyone the same - as an individual. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes in reference to colorblindness, “These frames… set whites onto paths of no return. By regarding race-related matters as nonracial, ‘natural,’ or rooted in ‘people’s choices,’ whites deem almost all proposals to remedy racial inequality necessarily as illogical, undemocratic, and ‘racist’ (in reverse)” (Bonilla-Silva 2010, 179). The differences, then, in social position have to do with choices, and residual
racism is due to prejudiced individuals for whom tolerant individuals, such as allies, are not responsible.

Although treating people as neutral individuals is presented as a general tenet of a politics of niceness, it is most often a behavior demanded of minority subjects. Straight, cisgender allies can usually expect to be judged as individuals, rather than as part of a category. Feigenbaum writes, "only socially advantaged positions merit unmediated access to the privilege of claiming status as an individual, outside the trajectory of history, culture, and social bonds. Identifying with such power neatly insulates individuals from scrutiny" (Feigenbaum 2007 6). LGBT people, as part of a minority group, come to expect to be generalized, while allies, or straight, cisgender people, when described as a whole, often take offense. One of the most common complaints allies make about hateful comments from LGBT people is that they are generalizing or homogenizing all straight, cisgender people. In this complaint, we can see the demand to recognize difference, but it is a “neoliberal conception of difference, isolated from relationships of power, and its concomitant multiplication of claims of victimization” and instead focused on the individual (Jones and Mukherjee 2010, 407). This version of difference values abstract liberal individualism, and allows for allies to believe that they are the “good” straight, cisgender people.

When this location is challenged through the generalized criticism of and anger towards allies or towards cisgender, heterosexual people, it is experienced as a profound and unwarranted attack on both privilege and individuality.

The expectation of individuality is further enforced by the idea that the goal of the LGBT movement is “equal treatment-” that LGBT people be treated like
individuals rather than judged for their gender or sexuality. Tied to forms of assimilationist politics, this logic can be extended to allies, so that treating allies differently “simply” because they are cisgender and straight would, like homophobia or transphobia, be a form of discriminatory judgment that is generalizing, and thus untrue.

*I AM GOING TO FUCKING SCREAM NOT ALL CISHET PEOPLE ARE TRANSPHOBIC OR HOMOPHOBIC*

*NOT ALL LGBTQ+ PEOPLE ARE CISPHOBIC OR HETEROPHOBIC*

*WHY CANT PEOPLE ON TUMBLR JUST FUCKING GET ALONG WITHOUT HATING OR BASHING ANYONE FOR BEING WHO THEY FUCKING ARE* (StraightVoices, sexyshinjiikkari)

Such a focus on the ways in which hate or criticism unfairly generalize can obscure the ways in which criticisms often express important concerns and needs that LGBT people have, especially when directed at allies. The overarching system of privilege and power is ignored in favor of viewing everyone individually, as in colorblind racism, despite social hierarchies that do exist in a more generalized form.

The demand to “not generalize” removes privilege from the equation and sees success as due to a person’s personal trait rather than their social position. The neoliberal model of individual success in the marketplace is extended to LGBT politics in ways that fail to take into account systematic or structural conditions. As Dean Spade writes, “The general trend in neoliberal politics of denying that unequal conditions exist, portraying any unequal conditions that do exist as natural or neutral, and suggesting that key access/resource issues are a matter of individual ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’” allows for success to be down to one person’s choices, luck, or talent (Spade 2011, 58).
One especially potent example of this form of individualized success is the song “Same Love.” Not only are Macklemore and Ryan Lewis (the writers/performers) actively profiting from their opinions on queer issues as people purchase their music, they are gaining symbolic and cultural capital, both in the form of popularity and awards and in the form of supposedly activist credentials. Cultural capital, as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu, aids in social mobility due to a person's ability to lay claim to certain markers that identify one as a certain type of social individual, in this case a progressive "ally" in favor of marriage equality. This cultural capital can often be exchanged for economic capital, as it was in the profits made from "Same Love." The MTV Video Music Award [VMA] that it won, for “Best Song with a Social Message,” is a physical manifestation of symbolic capital, of the progressive credentials that Macklemore and Ryan Lewis have received for this song.

Macklemore was lauded both for the song and for his use of LGBT themes as a risk that he, as a straight person, did not have to take. This “generosity” was a risk that paid off: “Same Love” has won multiple awards, including the aforementioned VMA and a nomination for the Song of the Year Grammy, has been viewed on Youtube over a hundred million times, and rose to number 11 on the Billboard Hot 100 in the United States.

Some, however, observed that a song about LGBT rights, even such normalized rights as marriage, could only become popular when performed by a rich, straight, white, cisgender male. In light of this situated understanding of the success of “Same Love,” many allies get very defensive on Macklemore’s behalf. For instance, there were quite a few vitriolic comments following a Huffington Post
article on Le1f, a queer black rapper who tweeted a number of negative responses to “Same Love,” focusing on Macklemore’s profits and his appropriation of LGBT rights and community, such as “I'm gonna write a song about disabled people, or about the aboriginal struggle. cuz mama needs a new fur coat. oh wait, that's evil” (quoted in Nichols 2013).

Responses pointed to Le1f’s lack of success, his purported negativity, and the positive impact of increased visibility for LGBT people. “As for Same Love puh-lease. That was a beautifully thought out song and you know you are a jealous person. Anything giving the LGBT movement some positive words of encouragement sounds good to me! Why don't you go out and do the same Le1f...oh wait, I'm sorry you're probably not successful enough” (KellyOKellyWeee). Another commented that

[Le1f] can bite it when it comes to "Same Love" and so can the rest of the gay community if they think this song "harms" us. Being ignored and demonized in hip-hop culture harms us. Having someone (anyone, regardless of race, orientation, etc) make a song that is able to talk about homosexuality in a real and positive way (that I can sing along to during my commute) get's my thumbs up. Our relationships ARE "normative and good" ...I thought that is what we were fighting for, to have the world understand that we are not some disgusting cast-offs of society. We are your family, friends and members of your community. We are people just like everyone else. (Alisha Dixon)

These comments point to the ways in which Macklemore’s representation of LGBT people fits into a respectability narrative, while criticisms like Le1f’s do not, making Macklemore more appealing to both an assimilationist agenda and to most allies. Macklemore’s positive representation is far preferred to Le1f’s negativity, which is especially troubling due to Le1f’s queerness in comparison with Macklemore’s normative identity. Yet rather than explore these more structural dynamics, ally
culture, like other neoliberal rationalities, encourages us to view Macklemore’s success as due to his individual talents, rather than because of any social privilege.

**But What about My Feelings?**

Due to the overt policing of emotion and “tone,” ally culture helps to shift focus from what is said and onto how it is conveyed. Affect is a crucial part of organizing resistance, as many theorists such as Gould or Reger would claim:

I argue that the transformation of individual emotions to collective action occurs in stages: finding space in which to respond to moral shocks related to anger and alienation; engaging in organizationally focused emotion work to create shared emotions that eliminate feelings of hopelessness or frustration; and, if reciprocal emotions are fostered and everyday life obstacles are overcome, moving into collective action. (Reger 2004 208)

Yet anger, alienation, hopelessness or frustration, the initial emotions that foster group action, are often rejected by allies and by LGBT people claiming respectability. Instead, a combination of the unacceptability of what is seen as hate and the rejection of generalization derails many online conversations so that they end up focused more on the ally’s hurt feelings and less on the original criticism.

This shift in focus is accomplished through advocating individualism over structural explanations, perceived as generalizations. Some LGBT commenters argue against this individualization through slightly tongue-in-cheek comments or metaphorical situations that ridicule ally culture, while simultaneously pointing to the failures of allyship.

I’m trapped in an avalanche. I’m fighting to get myself out, but more snow just keeps piling on, and I shout, “I FUCKING HATE SNOW!”

A passing skier, not stopping to help me out, gives me a concerned look.
“That’s not fair; it’s not the snow’s fault, it’s the avalanche!”

His companion adds, “Yeah, plus, not EVERY SINGLE snowflake is on top of you.”

Both skiers say they totally support me getting out, then leave, mentally patting themselves on the back for speaking up in the name of Justice. (LGBTLaugh, clearly a good role model)

In this metaphor, LGBT people are buried in the snow, which is representing straight people (the avalanche is homophobia). The straight allies are the skiers, offering lip service toward support, rather than admitting that they could be part of the problem and that the buried LGBT person has a reason to be angry, and to perhaps express this anger as hatred. LGBT people are expressing their troubles and the ways in which heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and their marginalization in the social realm affect them, and instead of responding with concern or even just listening respectfully, allies often respond with "but I'm not like that" or "that's heterophobic," completely derailing the conversation.

In these fora, the ways in which complaints are stated must be carefully calculated, or else the commentators risk an extended argument over phrasing in which the person who was originally commenting on systematic mistreatment is accused of mistreating straight people, or cisgender people, or allies. All statements are expected to be qualified in a way that would be considered ridiculous in most situations.

person A after having a crappy day: wow i hate mondays

person B: yeah totally understand. i do not require you to assure me that you don't hate every monday that has ever existed or that you believe mondays are universally awful

vs

person A after dealing with an 'ally' being shitty: wow i hate allies
person B: erm not all allies are bad stop bullying them every time you complain you MUST include the qualifier that not all allies are like that or else that's as bad as homophobia (LGBTLaughs, modpost)

The demand for such qualifications stems from the requirement that comments are “positive,” rather than critical. This demand, as Ahmed would point out, orients the dialogue towards normative forms of happiness. “It is not just that feminists [or in this case critical LGBT people] might not be happily affected by what is supposed to cause happiness, but our failure to be happy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others” (Ahmed 2010a, 2). The failure of some LGBT people to be happy about (all forms of) allyship, and therefore to be happy alongside allies who are pleased with their own decency, can be seen as sabotaging not only good feeling, but also political movement. Allies, in turn, feel that they have a right to feel good about what they are doing, as they are, in their own view, altruistically helping others. When this happiness is disrupted, their very relationship with their own good feeling and self-understandings as decent people can be disrupted, requiring LGBT people to reshape their criticism reassurance or positivity.

In addition to demanding reassurance, these derailing tactics often rely on false logic or exaggeration, such as equating what they call heterophobia with homophobia or picking out the angriest LGBT opinions and displaying them out of context. This behavior gets criticized by many LGBT people, although such responses are largely ignored by those who are derailing conversations.

"OMG I HATE HOW TUMBLR HATES ON STRAIGHT PEOPLE, WHY DO THEY HAVE TO [probably didn’t happen] AND [needs citation]. MAKING FUN OF STRAIGHT PEOPLE IS [false equivalence]. IT’S LIKE [an analogy so poorly researched it would be more accurate to call it a lie]" (LGBTLaughs, neutralmiltankhotel)
Derailing can also be about prioritizing allies’ needs and feelings, so the bad feelings of allies are considered valid and important, while LGBT negativity is viewed as counterproductive. Queers, like Ahmed’s feminist killjoys “are read as being unhappy, such that situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as about the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what feminists are unhappy about” (Ahmed 2010b, 67). In this way, unhappiness or negativity can be discounted without its root causes being examined at all.

The unhappiness of allies, on the other hand, is often portrayed as highly relevant, despite protests from many queer people:

- **queer person:** queer issues are not about your feelings
- **straight person:** BUT MY FEELINGS (LGBTLaughs, modpost)

Derailing often serves to recenter the needs of straight, cisgender allies, presenting their problems as equally relevant if not even more important than the oppression suffered by LGBT people. This redirects energy towards combatting “heterophobia” or “cisphobia” in place of the oppressions affecting LGBT people. As the above comment points out, this is not what LGBT movement is about. What Ward describes as “the ‘unity through difference and equality’ frame” promotes sameness through difference, somewhat paradoxically (Ward 2008 8). Ignoring social or structural inequalities or oppression, in this frame allies can expect to be treated as discrete, differentiated individuals because, on a larger scale, people are “all the same.”

**It’s all the Same Love**

In this way, the ideal of sameness connects, somewhat counterintuitively, to the idea of not generalizing. If everyone should be taken as an individual, then
everyone should be treated in the same way and be capable of going through similar life processes. In the LGBT rights movement, one clear example is marriage equality, which is perceived as individual and something that should be available to all people due to the sameness of our rights and our love (see Warner 2000). This is not a new rhetoric: “Internal political struggle over agendas of assimilation (emphasizing sameness) and separation (emphasizing difference) has been present since the inception of these [LGBT and queer] movements, as it has in other movements” (Gamson 1995 395). But it has gained political traction and popularity, even hegemony, in recent years.

The song “Same Love,” and its wild success, is an example of such rhetoric being completely incorporated into ally culture. Called the “Ally Anthem,” “Same Love,” as its title suggests, is a song written and performed by an ally that emphasizes the sameness of all love. The lyrics of "Same Love" have been prominent in campaigns for same sex marriage; the song has its own page on the website Washington United for Marriage, for instance. The language of the song further removes its message from its context: it is not just about sameness, or equality, but about love. Macklemore raps,

   Whatever God you believe in
   We come from the same one
   Strip away the fear
   Underneath it's all the same love

As Michael Warner says, within public discourse, "Love is self-validating" (Warner 2000 101). This form of sameness displaces politics and creates a supposedly individualized, nonsocial sphere of privacy and choice that does not need to be validated or explained. Limiting understanding of queer politics to simply an
individual choice to listen to this music or to propose to that person erases the ways in which power influences the possibilities available or desirable.

The logic of sameness also permits allies to present their own views as equally important: as Macklemore raps, “I may not be the same/ but that’s not important.” This quote shows the ways that individual differences are enfolded into a generalizing sameness: we are each individuals who should be treated in the same way. As a political logic, sameness rhetoric views LGBT people as nonthreatening and natural; “rights are gained, according to this logic, by demonstrating similarity (to heterosexual people, to other minority groups) in a nonthreatening manner” (Gamson 1995, 396). Sameness logics also support the view that sexuality is innate: ideas that LGBT people were “born this way,” that sexuality is not a choice, or that LGBT people can’t help who we love. “Same Love” also repeats the line, "I can't change," sung by Mary Lambert: implied in this is that LGBT people would choose to be different if they could, and should be granted equality due to the fact that they cannot help their desires or identities. Therefore, although Macklemore admits that he is “different” than LGB people, this difference is both naturalized and normalized. This normalizing discourse creates LGBT community and identity as just an aspect of a person that does not affect their desires or life processes.

For example, there is a popular image of Josh Hutchinson, a young straight actor and advocate for LGBT rights, with duct-tape over his mouth. This image is from the “No H8” pro-LGBT organization and photography project. It was posted onto Straight Voices with Hutchinson’s statement, "I'm so sick of saying the words gay and lesbian, THEY'RE JUST PEOPLE" inscribed next to his face
(StraightVoices, seerdream). Of course, as the poster trans-awareness notes, the
“They’re just people!” can demand the erasure of “the words people use to define
themselves just for your own comfort, you asshole.”

Sameness rhetoric as a form of social erasure in the name of political
advocacy is overwhelmingly present in mainstream LGBT activism. The rhetoric
takes both overt and more hidden forms, from “We are just the same,” to the It Gets
Better Project’s more subtle equating of various types of bullying, at times treating
homophobia as a social problem that one will simply age out of. As the Project’s
website explains, “Growing up isn’t easy. Many young people face daily tormenting
and bullying, leading them to feel like they have nowhere to turn. This is especially
true for LGBT kids and teens, who often hide their sexuality for fear of bullying.” It
is not that LGBT youth are bullied when other children are not, but just that they are
bullied more, and need to be shown “the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity
their lives will reach – if they can just get through their teen years.” Having survived
this bullying, they will go on to lead fulfilling and normative lives, just like everyone
else.

The It Gets Better Project claims that many people of all identities are bullied.
In a similar vein, many people are (or have been) oppressed for various reasons, and
this oppression is also universalized. “Same Love,” for instance, points to all
prejudice as the same:

Gay is synonymous with the lesser
It's the same hate that's caused wars from religion
Gender to skin color, the complexion of your pigment
The same fight that led people to walk outs and sit ins
It's human rights for everybody, there is no difference!
These lyrics erase crucial differences between various struggles. As many feminist and critical race theorists have noted, the use of analogy can further false equivalences and erase intersections of identity and power (see Cohen 1997, Crenshaw 1991, Heyes 2007). In this case, sameness endorses a narrow, rights-and-equality mode of LGBT activism in which the specific differences that queer- or trans*-ness makes is erased in the name of “everyone’s” struggle for recognition.

**LGBT (de)Politicization**

Current LGBT social movement revolves around “calls for expansive democratic publicness, *combined* with arguments for forms of individual and group autonomy, attempt to redefine *equality, freedom, justice, and democracy* in ways that exceed their limited (neo)liberal meanings” (Duggan 2003, 87). The neoliberal framework equates recognition and equality: increasing recognition allows for different identities to slowly enter the media and the public sphere; this visibility will enable LGBT people to become normalized in the eyes of more and more people due to sheer exposure. However, because ally culture encourages allies to speak for and on behalf of LGBT people, this entrance is often second hand: discussion of LGBT needs or identities by straight, cisgender allies.

Much ally-sponsored visibility is, perhaps unsurprisingly, assimilationist. Like “Same Love” or It Gets Better, the logic of homonormative LGBT activism enabled the narrative that Jasbir Puar calls "American sexual exceptionalism," in which the United States is a presented as a space of progressive morality and freedom. This narrative is built upon the inclusion of some, but not all, gay bodies- those who are
normative. As Duggan argues, homonormativity “is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 2003, 51). Logics of visibility, normalization, and inclusion are central to LGBT ability to assimilate, and therefore to a homonormative form of LGBT allyship.

By policing anger and other “negative” or “counterproductive” emotions and expressions, ally culture acts as a form of political control. The mobilizing force of anger in social movements is contained through a logic that insists on sameness, individualism, and rational modes of discourse that perpetuate the illusion of a universal subject, equal before the law.

Equal treatment also includes niceness in interpersonal interactions, and the lack thereof can then be coded as oppression. The possibility of LGBT movement is further stifled by the insistence that oppression occurs through interpersonal meanness and hurt feelings, rather than as part of a larger structure. If this is the case, then both respectability and equality could be achieved through a certain affective performance that would alter how an LGBT person interacts with a straight, cisgender person, rather than through radical changes to the social hierarchy.
Chapter 3: 
Affect and Oppression

Ironically, allies often oppress through anti-oppression discourse. In everything from Tumblr usernames (itsalloppression or fuckofftranspeople) to tags (“why can’t we all have opinions,” “straight pride,” “love everyone,” or “discrimination” and “cisphobia”), one can see the perceived equivalence between the hurt feelings of allies, discussed in chapter 2, and the oppression that LGBT people suffer. The focus on individualized affect in ally-LGBT interactions can obscure the threads of power that weave throughout ally-LGBT relationships. In the upcoming chapter, I will focus more specifically on these power dynamics and the social implications of current ally culture.

In the first part of this chapter, I name and present dynamics of current oppression discourse within allyship. More theoretical definitions understand oppression to be systematic and institutionalized power, in contrast to individualized narratives. Social theorists have argued that oppression consists of multiple and overlapping processes. Black and Stone, for instance, outline three types of oppression: primary, which is “is active, blatant, and purposeful,” secondary, encompassing “persons are not active in the oppression of others yet [who] benefit from the oppression,” and finally “tertiary oppression, in which members of an oppressed group seek the approval from the dominant group by ‘selling out’ or indirectly victimizing members of their own group” (Black and Stone 2005, 245). This definition combines a logic of discrimination through prejudiced individuals, as
promoted by ally discourse, with an understanding of wider oppression that an ally cannot opt out of, and that even LGBT people themselves sometimes advance.

However, ally discourse relies upon individualized discrimination rather than systematic oppression, removing allies from the category of oppressor and ignoring more theoretical definitions of oppression. This interpersonal understanding fails to differentiate between harm done to LGBT people by straight, cisgender people and bad feelings provoked in allies by critical LGBT people. Of course, as Marilyn Frye explains, “not everything which frustrates or limits a person is oppressive, and not every harm or damage is due to or contributes to oppression” (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 19). Yet the combination of individualizing logic and diversity rhetoric often claim that all harms are equal, ignoring larger structural patterns and depoliticizing conversations between allies and LGBT people. As Ward argues, “implied in the logic of diversity is that practical and fair-minded people are interested in multiple human complexities [and] understand that people should not be reduced to any single component of their identity” (Ward 2008 11). These kinds of logics, as I have demonstrated, tend to sidestep structural understandings of power, yet continue to utilize the term “oppression.”

Homonormative LGBT politics like those espoused by most allies, is, Duggan argues, an “emergent ‘multicultural,’ neoliberal ‘equality’ politics- a stripped-down, nonredistributive form of ‘equality’ designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century, and compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources” (Duggan 2003 XII). Such an upward distribution includes the rewards given to allies for their support of a system of equality that continues to
disproportionately benefit them and other straight, cisgender people. Such equality promotes tolerance, but fails to understand deeper and more socially ingrained forms of inequality. In the remainder of this chapter, I will demonstrate ally-LGBT dynamics around ideas of oppression by analyzing mechanisms like “privilege through denial,” the “prejudiced oppressor,” and ideals of individual talent and rewards. These dynamics inform processes of affective policing, visibility politics, and the legitimation of allies at the expense of LGBT people.

Models of Allyship

Privilege through Denial

Understandings and definitions of allyship often fail to take into account that, in order for one to align oneself with a marginalized group from the outside, one must have privilege. Of course privilege is intersectional, and LGBT allies may be privileged in some ways and marginalized in others. Still, allies do have cisgender and heterosexual privilege, and this is often what they are leveraging in doing ally work.

By “privilege,” I mean the possibility or even encouragement of ignoring the social locations from which one benefits. In this way, although oppression might name the larger dynamic, privilege is the necessary social corollary. Privilege refer to the “unearned institutionalized entitlements and advantages” afforded to cisgender heterosexual allies, such as “marriage, custody, and adoption rights; tax and insurance benefits; anti-discrimination protection in housing and employment; and benefits and protections in terms of military service, inheritance, hospital visitation, pensions and
immigration.” Privilege further includes the “liberty to associate primarily with members of one's own group,” expectations of “acceptance across different social contexts,” “freedom from having individual behavior stereotyped as being reflective of one's group,” and, most critically for ally culture, the “freedom to be unaware of one's own privileged status, and… ability to feel 'at home' in the world” (Simoni and Walters 2001, 158-159, see also, Swigonski 1996, Kimmel and Ferber 2003, Gonsiorek and Weinrich 1991). This combination of legal and social benefits often remain unconsidered or at least unchallenged, even by allies who claim to be fighting oppression. After all, privilege means that allies do not have to acknowledge their own roles in perpetuating a heteronormative system, or the ways in which they benefit from this system.

However, even if allies do take steps to notice and recognize their privilege, simply acknowledging privilege is still not enough: Andrea Smith writes, “the undoing of privilege occurs not by individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think themselves into a new subject position, but through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges” (Smith 2013). In order for allyship to be affective, allies must both understand and acknowledge their own privileges and work not just to end discrimination, but also their own privilege. The first step, however, must be to realize the extent and scale of privilege itself. Ian Ayres and Jennifer Brown discuss the ways in which heterosexual privilege blocks understanding of processes of privilege, until “many progressive, well-intentioned heterosexual people are so used to the advantage their sexual orientation conveys that they are blind to it” and may not even “see how a lack of privileges affects bisexuals,
lesbians, and gay men” (Ayres and Brown 2005, 3). In this way, ally culture’s focus merely on discrimination rather than privilege obscures larger systematic processes of oppression.

*The Prejudiced Oppressor*

A variant on “privilege through denial” might be called “the prejudiced oppressor.” In this model people “may grudgingly grant the systematic nature of inequality,” but still imagine that “racism, sexism, heterosexism are bad attitudes held by bad people” (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 2). Due to the point of view that individual prejudice, rather than systematic oppression, is to blame for social inequality, allies can perceive themselves as existing outside of systematic inequality as long as they do not have these “bad attitudes”; they can also believe that the correction of such attitudes will be enough to cure oppression.

In ally culture, the charges of anti-heterosexism or cisphobia are forms of this model, with an important twist: if, in neoliberal logics of power, oppression comes from bad, prejudiced individuals (the lone racist, say, and not structural racism), in the ally version of this logic, oppression becomes a charge leveled against the oppressed. It is the LGBT person, in other words, who becomes the prejudiced oppressor – of heterosexual, cisgendered allies – even as of course “heterophobia” or “cisphobia” lack the institutional and cultural power that homophobia and transphobia deploy to do their work. This is a hyper-extension of a larger individualized understanding of power, in which prejudice is an individual bad attitude and oppression is interpersonal.
Like “privilege through denial,” the prejudiced oppressor model sidelines privilege and power. For example, sometimes heterophobia is discussed as if it is more important or more prevalent than homophobia: "please reblog this if you support TRUE EQUALITY and want heterophobia/cisphobia to END!!!!!!" (StraightVoices, eposetties). True equality is here redirected away from the group that is culturally and legally disadvantaged, and back onto the privileged group in order to protect them from bad feeling on the internet. As Kimmel writes:

"We hear that oppressing is oppressive to those who oppress as well as to those they oppress… When the stresses and frustrations of being a man are cited as evidence that oppressors are oppressed by their oppressing, the word 'oppression' is being stretched to meaninglessness; it is treated as though its scope includes any and all human experience of limitation or suffering, no matter its cause, degree or consequence. Once such usage has been put over on us, then if ever we deny that any person or group is oppressed, we seem to imply that we think they never suffer and have no feelings. We are accused of insensitivity; even of bigotry." (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 13)

Just because straight people might be harmed by certain heteronorms, or by being considered part of a generalized group of "heterosexuals," does not mean that they are not privileged in the overall system of heteronormativity. Yet, the operations of privilege mean that those who benefit from it tend to not notice it until it is removed. Similarly, hurt feelings cannot be equated to systematic oppression, because LGBT "meanness" is not institutionalized or capable of enforcing itself through society. For instance, one post on Straight Voices attempted to echo the common phrasing of "cis scum," which expresses anger towards cisgender people. It read, "DIE TRANS SCUM… there is no difference in this statement and the one often thrown around, aka “Die cis scum” but it made you upset didn’t it?" (StraightVoices, kristen-is-a-secret-agent).
A number of people took exception to this, and pointed out that there is a difference: it is not just about the phrasing, or the anger behind it, but also the ways in which such a comment interacts with power and with daily life:

Cis people use this statement unironically. Trans* people don’t say “die cis scum” unless they’re being sarcastic (and I’m sure a few trans* people have said it in all seriousness but it isn’t a widespread thing). The majority of the people using “die cis scum” are either cis people trying to make trans* people look bad, trans* people talking about how ridiculous it is that cis people think we use that statement, or cis people complaining about trans* people saying it even though trans* people don’t actually say it.

When someone says “die cis scum” nobody is actually going to feel justified in killing a cis person for being cis. When people say “die trans* scum” it justifies actual violence and murder against trans* people.

They are not the same, you fucking transphobe. (trans-awareness)

Another reply pointed out similar problems, but with an emphasis that negative comments toward cisgender people are a direct response to transphobic comments, and the lack of other responses available to trans* people, who are being violently oppressed.

Here’s the difference…

One of those has literally meant murder to people in real life.

The other is an understandably frustrated response to the above.

Congrats for equating them there.

Sorry, but “two wrongs don’t make a right, kumba yaaaa~” isn’t how the world works. We don’t all occupy the same place in the societal hierarchy, so when someone from a higher position does something to someone of a lower position, it’s not the same as vice versa. (atomic-glitter)

The importance of hierarchy, of social power, rather than simple interpersonal feelings, is what is at stake in these debates. Abby Ferber argues that by effacing systematic oppression in the name of personal prejudice, "these oppression-blind
ideologies minimize... privilege and reframe the issue in the abstract liberal terms of free choice and individualism," in which each person simply chooses to be prejudiced or not, regardless of their social position (Ferber 2012, 72). Understanding power as individual, as about one person supporting or discriminating against another, fails to deconstruct the hierarchy that privileges those who wish to be allies. It allows for a purely interpersonal viewpoint, which also creates oppression as a simple problem of individual prejudices that can be eradicated by challenging bigoted people's opinions, rather than oppression as dispersed through society and ingrained into our institutions and norms, and even into the lives and thoughts of allies.

_Talent and Success_

The individualizing logic of power means that rather than seeing their ability to publicize LGBT issues, raise money, or gain support more easily than LGBT people themselves as a function of their privilege, allies often see it as due to their own, individualized talent or ability, as mentioned previously with regard to individualism. As with Macklemore and “Same Love,” Black and Stone theorize;

Privileged persons misperceive that they have "earned" the benefits, status, and/or rank. They must work to maintain their belief in the status quo in order to view themselves as superior, more fortunate, and more talented than those who are oppressed. The privileged must rely on denial or other defensive reactions to maintain this fragile sense of superiority and to combat the dissonance and confusion that accompany the recognition and understanding of their privilege. (Black and Stone 2005, 251)

This form of denial is very clear in the online discussions of “Same Love.”

Macklemore’s privilege as shaping his success is completely ignored, and his profits are dismissed as a motive and instead understood as a well-deserved bonus, as
discussed previously. Fans were able to negate the profit-driven aspects of the music business by re-envisioning his work as charity; because he is celebrating LGB identities, he should also be gaining something (gratitude, at the very least).

The denial of his situated nature fits into the previously discussed ideal of individualized success, in which people are responsible for their own position outside of generalized structural hierarchies, as put forward by neoliberal thinker Milton Friedman, who claims that "an impersonal market separates economic activities from political views and protects men from being discriminated against in their economic activities for reasons that are irrelevant to their productivity," yet minority subjects "mistakenly attribute the residual discrimination to the market" (Friedman 1962, 21). Since all artists are free to produce music, and the market is supposedly impartial, they all have an equal opportunity to become popular. When Macklemore’s song becomes successful where queer rappers, such as Le1f, fails to gain a wider audience, this is seen as due to talent or ability to market oneself.

Yet critiques of queer media point out that "while market recognition and flashy images might seem like useful ways to get a rainbow-coloured foot in the door, they are not enough to push open the door to acceptance and diversity. After all, profit, not progress, is the ultimate goal in a capitalist system and commodification does not necessarily equal liberation" (Guidotto 2006, 22, see also Chasin 2001). The wider neoliberal system, however, equates equality with market viability with liberation. Therefore, Macklemore’s allyship involves supporting a very specific and neoliberal form of freedom; freedom to marry, as expressed in the lyrics "Till the day that my uncles can be united by law…And a certificate on paper isn't gonna solve it
But it's a damn good place to start." This push towards a highly visible form of legal equality, accomplished through inclusion in institutions, shores up existing norms and life trajectories, simply adding more people. For this assimilationist version of “liberation,” public recognition is the strategy of choice, and therefore allies expect to be congratulated for contributing to it.

This process, and the problems with it, is summed up in a comment titled “My queer community is sacred:”

There are few places where I can put myself and be related to as a queer person and as a gender queer person. There is little to no mainstream media that I can nod my head to in those regards. All I really have as outlets are my friends, my blog community, and my volunteer work.

So when hetero people, who are almost inherently oppressive, decide that someone like Macklemore is doing me something good and that I need to be grateful, I am not fucking pleased.

Macklemore’s shitty song did nothing to improve my life… People who are making valid criticisms of his praise are being called nitpickers… For talking about someone’s affect on the queer community. (Queer Voices on Straight Voices, lowproductionvalue)

When allies react negatively to criticism their negativity is used to police LGBT affective responses. Ally comfort, then, is valued over the political expression of LGBT people. When this happens, not only is privilege’s role in ally-LGBT relationships obscured, but LGBT people are expected to be thankful for allies’ yielding this power in ways that may or may not be helpful.

*Threats and Rewards*
When other attempts to refocus energy towards allies fail, or allies continue to feel excluded despite such tactics being used, there is often a more direct threat that allies might withdraw their allyship unless they are included. For example:

I’ve also seen a bunch of people say that a good quality in an ally is to “shut up” or “be quiet”. Guess you guys don’t want your rights then… (StraightVoices, babylizard)

Drawing on the discourse of tolerance, in which tolerance itself serves to reenact a power differential, in this case the ally is in a position to help or not help those with whom they are allied, a form of power over members of the LGBT community of which LGBT people are highly cognizant.

how good does it make you feel to be able to hold absolute basic equality over queer people’s heads like a carrot on a goddamn stick that you want us to dance and pander to you for (LGBT Laughs, lgbt-supporters)

The idea that these threats allow allies to feel good points towards the reassertion of privilege that can, and does, occur within and through allyship. Abby Ferber (2012) writes about victim blaming as a way of reasserting privilege; this is what is occurring when such threats are deployed, in that they are claiming that it will be the fault of LGBT people if they are discriminated against once their allies leave. Indeed, the ability to even make these threats is a reassertion of privilege.

When allies feel discriminated against, they demand active work on the part of LGBT people who wish to retain their allies. The weak position of LGBT people in the current understanding of allyship, in which LGBT people need allies and allies do not feel responsible for supporting them, makes it possible for allies to expect that LGBT people will do the emotional labor of the movement. Ironically, such emotional labor is in response to allies’ emotions – particularly feelings of hurt, or
exclusion, which are typically dismissed when coming from LGBT people. Such emotional work comes in the form of “Ally Weeks,” which recognize and support allies and are seen as a necessary addition to LGBT weeks or months, or even in requests for “Straight Pride” or Ally flags, like the Gay Pride flag. With such demands, it can become the job of LGBT people to overcome their bad feelings so as to support or bolster the ally.

Such a reversal of roles occurs in other forms of social allyship. Shannon Sullivan writes, "it is all too easy for white people's good intentions to address racism in responsible, antiracist ways to reenact the very white privilege that they wish to undermine" (Sullivan 2006, 167). This is what occurs when self-described allies insist on being treated in certain ways in order to maintain their own positive self-understandings, even as LGBT people are asked to contain their negative emotions. "The term 'hierarchical reciprocity' means something different than asymmetrical reciprocity, which acknowledges that one side has more power than the other… the more powerful must do things with the less powerful, not to them, consulting with them instead of unilaterally deciding what is best for them" (Sullivan 2006, 173). When allies angrily declare that they are helping, or that Macklemore is forwarding equality, or that they know the direction that LGBT rights should take, allies fail in this consultation, and reproduce hierarchies that comprehend straight, cisgender needs and opinions as more valid. Allies’ ability to ignore power allows for this ally/LGBT hierarchy to once again be portrayed as natural and normal. Allies are not seen as enforcing their own views at the expense of LGBT opinions: they simply know what’s best. As Straight Voices also claims in its previously mentioned heading, “no
matter what anyone says, straight people's opinions do matter. in fact they can be more effective in fighting bigotry because they're not emotionally biased” (StraightVoices, heading). This denial of hierarchy within allyship and between allies and LGBT people even comes to be seen as part of a process towards equality, rather than a reiteration of oppression.

“Including” Allies

Allies often expect that LGBT community spaces will be spaces in which they can safely ask their questions and be educated, allowing them to be corrected kindly and to express their own emotions. This expectation of inclusion relies on an understanding that ideal political spaces will be open to everyone, that all exclusions are politically distasteful, and that the proper response to ignorance is education.

Some of the Tumblr sites I have been discussing are not inclusive spaces. LGBT Laughs specifically states that it is not a space meant for allies:

this blog was not made for straight (cis) people, no matter how allied they are. straight people, you are guests in this space.

if you can’t handle a member of an oppressed community being angry, snarky, teasing or mean about the oppressors (a group you are still part of even if you’re an “ally”), then leave. (LGBT Laughs, moderator)

This warning is directed against the assumption that allies are or should be welcome everywhere, that LGBT-exclusive spaces have no political a value.

Ally expectation of inclusion in spaces and conversations can encompass a demand to be educated: because they wish to become better allies through better understanding, allies often desire inclusion in order to participate in educational
discussions and become more informed. Although on the surface, such a process might seem helpful, there is an underlying understanding that it is the responsibility of LGBT people to educate their allies, and that the ignorance of allies is the fault of the education given to them by LGBT people (rather than their own lack of self-motivated learning). White allies’ assumptions that they will be educated have been criticized in similar terms, such as in Suey Park’s article “Challenging Racism and the Problem with White Allies:

The push back against the expectation that “people of color educate white folks” is a rejection of centering white desire and need. The presumption here is that white people need/want to be educated about issues of racism, about inequality, or about differences in experience, and that this desire should compel people of color to act. This is all about white desire; it is about white agency and the expectation of Others helping white folk grow, learn, and be better people.¹⁰

Education is often seen as a cure for bad allyship when, in truth, it is already part of a process that recreates the dominance and centrality of the ally in LGBT spaces. Allies do not want to take the time to educate themselves or seek appropriate venues in which to ask questions. They want their answers immediately and without effort, and excuse this desire as a reasonable and necessary in order to sustain their allyship.

This does not mean that I am against education; I want allies and other straight, cisgender people to improve their understandings of LGBT issues. However, when the demands for such education recenter ally needs and desires in LGBT spaces and discussions, ally “education” comes to seem more like LGBT erasure.

The failure to center ally needs in LGBT spaces can produce sites, like the ally centric Tumblr Straight Voices, that do prioritize allies. This Tumblr claims in its heading

that “this is a safe space for straight allies of gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered people. we also post things from gay people supporting straight people and valuing them for the contributions they make to ending hate” (StraightVoices, heading). This tag line echoes the original idea of LGBT “safe spaces” that may include allies, yet Straight Voices instead was created for allies and may include what might be called allies of allies. However, the existence of an ally safe space implies that the majority of spaces are not safe for straight people, denying a systematic privilege that they have and contributing to a discourse that holds up ally safety and need to feel “valued” over potential critiques. This is the kind of safe space that values a lack of conflict and a feeling of comfort above the creation of alternative communities. On the one hand, the ally claim to safe space is an appropriation of the very real needs for safety that characterize LGBT safe spaces. On the other, as critics of “safe space” such as Christina Hanhardt (2013) note, the concept often entails the privileging of some (middle-class gay gentrifiers, for example) over others (poor queer youth of color). In this way, the ally use of “safe space,” like the charge of heterophobia, overextends discourses of safety, inclusion, and affirmation against threatening others (in this case, LGBT people).

Such ally spaces paint everyone as equally in need of safe space and other concessions, and ally “exclusion” as discrimination. Abby Ferber points out this “reverse oppression” argument, like color-blind ideology, applies to discussions of gender; the argument similarly applies to sexuality and even cisgender/transgender on Tumblr:

Just as the advocates of color-blind racism believe that racial inequality is a thing of the past, and that further attempts to remedy inequality lead to
“reverse discrimination” against Whites, we see similar arguments about gender. This rearticulation of the minimization of discrimination frame leads to reifying the values of “abstract liberalism,” where feminism is attacked for violating the values of individualism and equal opportunity. (Ferber 2012, 68)

Arguments that depend on abstract liberal individualism understand people as fundamentally the same (at least in the eyes of the law), and therefore different treatment (such as affirmative action or safe space) are forms of discrimination. In this way, allies can make demands for inclusion, education, and support in part because of this assertion of both privilege and individualism, and these demands, in turn, serve to reaffirm their domination.

Such a focus on ally inclusion can even mean exchanging inclusion of some LGBT people for inclusion of allies, as is the case when allies insist that the “A” in many extended acronyms stands for ally, not asexual. In these cases, the erasure of asexual people is often seen as a legitimate sacrifice to allow allies to feel involved and as if they are part of “the community.”

why would you even think that the A in LGBTQA+ stands for ally though? like, they’re not part of the community they’re *allies* to it therefore not in the initialism y’know i mean if they think the A stands for ally instead of asexual they’re pretty shitty allies tbh [to be honest] (LGBTLaughs, confitureestmadrogue)

To which they got the reply, "Allies were here first. That’s why" (asklovestrucktwilight). The consistent erasure of asexual people is used here as an excuse to continue doing so. In this way, the expectation of inclusion at the expense of marginalized groups goes directly against the ally mandate of support, discussed in Chapter One, since it dovetails with liberal ideologies of colorblindness and
individualized equality that, in reality, serve to further benefit those who are already privileged.

“How about giving us the podium?”

These forms of privilege allow allies to speak for, and even over, those with whom they claim to ally, even as their situated social position and their privilege allows them to be heard. Due to allies’ greater ease in speaking and being heard by the general populace, ally voices are perceived as a helpful and sensible route to greater LGBT visibility, a common desire in current social movement that believes in neoliberal values of market presence and social recognition as leading to political goals. For instance, the home page of the It Gets Better website claims that “to date, the project has received submissions from celebrities, organizations, activists, politicians and media personalities,” and then lists a number of well-known people and organizations who have made videos. Out of the 14 people named on the It Gets Better website, only five are publicly known to be LGBT, despite the project purportedly intending to demonstrate to LGBT youth that they are not alone. This demonstrates a privileging of straight but famous voices over LGBTQ voices, as these famous voices are perceived as more enticing to the general populace. As prioritizing powerful ally voices takes precedence over encouraging LGBT people speaking for themselves, promoting ally voices also contributes to the silencing of LGBT voices, especially those with more radical queer politics.
As lupercos notes, straight voices, especially when considered to be part of an LGBTQ+ community, can be seen to drown out other voices, especially those who are minorities even within this group, such as trans* people.

(yelling) gay (normal voice) lesbian (muttering) bi….. sexual……. (confused whispering) tr………….. tran…….. trans…………..ss…………………………… (booming voice in the background) S T R A I G H T A L I E S (LGBTLaughs, lupercos,)

Due to their position in normative culture, allies also frequently fail to represent differing needs or positions of varying LGBT people, instead focusing almost exclusively on marriage and other assimilationist desires. Chasin writes, "the more commodified an image of a gay person is, the less likely it is to be a 'self'-representation. In the commodified version, we have no politics. In fact, in a whole range of ways, these images are assimilationist" (Chasin 2001, 238). Ally representations are often made simply to sell an image, whether this means literally selling a television show with an LGBT character, or more subtly selling the idea of allyship and LGBT people as "normal."

Ally representations further tend to present a very normative view even when discussing LGBT politics: many allies can only see oppression and inequality in the heteronormative goals which they have and LGBT people cannot achieve, such as marriage, nuclear family, state recognition, police protection, and more. As blogger Travis Mamone writes in “Macklemore and the Problem with Straight Allies,”

Here's the thing about straight allies: they're still in the process of deconstructing years of conditioned institutional homophobia and heteronormativity. They've spent their entire lives hearing messages that monogamous heterosexual relationship are the norm, and everything else is novelty. They've got a lot to unpack, so it's not the best idea to have straight allies be the spokespeople for the queer movement. Okay, so Macklemore is pro-marriage equality.
Great, fine, here's your cookie. Now how about giving us the podium for a while?\(^\text{11}\)

The idea that the podium must be given to LGBT people serves to further entrench the idea of ally visibility. Such requests often provoke defensiveness or threats not to help at all. This has been seen a great deal with Macklemore.

The lyrics of “Same Love” imply that Macklemore and Ryan Lewis made a personal decision to publicize LGB issues in the interest of freedom and equality:

When everyone else is more comfortable remaining voiceless
Rather than fighting for humans that have had their rights stolen
I might not be the same, but that's not important
No freedom till we're equal, damn right I support it

Macklemore explicitly points to voicelessness, but only as a function of comfort, not social position. Yet Macklemore is in a position to give voice to these issues, unlike a number of queer hip hop artists who are not mainstream, and therefore are not visible within this narrative of public attention. Macklemore's symbolic capital, in terms of his ability to universalize values and to publicize them, comes in part from his popularity and wealth from to previous songs, and in part from his normative location as a straight, white man.

In addition to Macklemore’s ability to produce and publicize “Same Love,” his reasons for writing this song are important. He and his fans have presented “Same Love” as altruistic and activist, but the production of this song is more meaningful than this, and its success as culture is more than simply individualized talent, as discussed previously and supported by neoliberal market rational. As Clayton Rosati writes in counter to neoliberal interpretations of cultural creation, "culture is never

\(^{11}\) Available on the blog “Travis Mamone:” http://www.travismamone.net/2014/01/macklemore-and-problem-with-straight.html
simply or romantically produced for its own sake (which is a political project in itself). Rather, cultural forms- and the authority of their production- are always implicated in a wider field of struggle over how the practice and meaning of daily life will be organised and in whose interests" (Rosati 2007, 557-558). The necessary corollary to Macklemore's ability to produce culture and to profit in this endeavor is the lack of such ability in others; the celebration of "Same Love" participates in the erasure of queer artists. One especially obvious example of this was on Ellen, on October 30, 2012, when Ellen DeGeneres announced, "Here's why you need to care about our next guests; no other artists in hip hop history have ever taken the stand defending marriage equality the way they have. Here to perform the anthem "Same Love," please welcome my new heroes, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis."

This is a moment in which one of the more privileged members of the LGBT community, both rich and white, erased the voices of those without the sociocultural capital to speak and be heard. Ellen claimed that no one has written a hip hop song like this before, effectively negating the voices of an entire movement of queer hip hop artists, many of color, who have failed to enter the public eye. Ellen's position as an upper-class white lesbian, her promotion of this song and of its normalizing discourse, and her accessibility to straight viewers are not factors that can be separated: she can also produce culture and is a media figure. She can declare the song writers "heroes": but what does it mean that the anthem for current LGBT movement, albeit a movement of normalization, was written by and provides profit for straight men, who are now "heroes" of LGBT people? What is at stake here is not an idea of "Same Love" as inherently problematic, although the lyrics do follow
specific political goals that not all LGBT people agree with. The biggest problem is that "Same Love" is being held up in the absence of queer voices in music, not because they do not exist, but because straight voices are the voices that have the authority to speak publicly on LGBT issues and be recognized and rewarded for it.

Neoliberal market rationality would have us believe that success is a marker of individual deservingness, rather than of something systematic. Yet media success is not just about whose songs become popular, as proposed by the highly individualistic narratives of many Macklemore fans. Such success is also about who is recognized in the public sphere and what kinds of LGBT identity are even legible; success is about who is affirmed in a concrete, direct manner and who is simply the subject of a song that belongs both legally and symbolically to someone else. Abby Ferber argues that "we must work to shift the entire discussion from this individualist approach to a sociocultural perspective, which examines the institutionalized culture of privilege and oppression," and in which we could recognize the many structural reasons for Macklemore’s success, rather than only seeing his individual ability (Ferber 2012, 74). The problem with “Same Love” is the problem with a system of success and publicity in which there are very few LGBT people in the media, and in which there are no famous songs about LGBT rights by LGBT people. This lack of LGBT-produced popular representation allows for those queer rappers who do exist to be systematically erased by comments like Ellen's. In “Stop Telling Queer People to be Grateful for Macklemore,” Madison Carlson writes,

*Real allies are great, but their voices should not be heard above the voices of the people they are purporting to help. We should not have to feel as though we aren’t allowed to speak about our own issues... He needs to promote queer artists and make space for them to speak. Because as long as he...*
takes, without recognition of his privilege, the place he’s been given as the voice of equality, he is harming us. As long as the voices of straight, cisgender supporters get more attention than the voices of queer people, we are not equal.\textsuperscript{12}

Visibility, though, is not the same as actual presence, and definitely not equivalent to equality. Simply because there is media coverage or a popular “queer anthem” playing on the radio does not mean that actual LGBT voices have an equal chance of being heard.

The perception that there is LGBT representation in the media and in the public eye, due to the presence of songs like “Same Love” or Lady Gaga’s “Born this Way” and of some secondary LGBT characters in some television shows, allows for LGBT demands for better representation to be dismissed as overly critical or ungrounded. In line with rationalist, pragmatic politics, the end result is seen as all that is important: there is LGBT representation, so issues of who is doing this representing (straight, cisgender people) or how (by leveraging their connections with LGBT people who remain voiceless) is considered by allies to be irrelevant. Complaints that this representation is not helpful, or is actively harmful, are perceived to reject the ideal of niceness, and thus are subject to tone policing.

\textbf{If Everyone Were Nice}

Affective policing is one way that ally culture functions to reorient LGBT politics, as discussed in chapter 2. The respectable, “nice,” LGBT person idealized in ally discourse is similarly demanded in other relationships between oppressed and oppressors, as Marilyn Frye points out:

\textsuperscript{12} Available on the blog “Feminspire:” http://feminspire.com/stop-telling-queer-people-to-be-grateful-for-macklemore/
It is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found 'difficult' or unpleasant to work with. (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 14)

Threatened with withdrawal of ally support, LGBT people must be uncomplaining, respectable LGBT individuals working in tandem with allies. In this image, LGBT people can use their interactions with allies to model a wide scale politics of positivity and responsibility that is being put to use in current assimilationist political movements. Yet this diminishes the importance of LGBT political problems: homophobia, for example, cannot be that bad if we are so cheerful, yet we must be cheerful in order to improve our lot in life.

At times this point of view is challenged, and LGBT problems are revealed to be greater than simply needing nicer interpersonal interactions: “Straight people are like “can we all just be nice to each other” and queer people are like “please stop murdering us”” (LGBTLaughs, greatwhiteprivilege). Niceness cannot stop systematic violence; it instead serves to obscure large picture problems by focusing on interpersonal and visibility issues.

Oppression is institutional, not just individual. As Michael Kimmel writes, "Renouncing privilege ultimately substitutes an individual solution for a structural and social problem. Inequality is structural and systematic as well as individual and attitudinal. Eliminating inequalities involves more than changing everyone's attitudes" (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 9). The demand that niceness be a main focus in LGBT social movement obscures this; even if an ally does recognize their own privilege,
recognition does not change or challenge one’s position in a system. Managing hurt feelings cannot be sufficient to fix such a wide cultural and institutional problem.

The understanding of compassion as the solution relies on a form of affective universality, where all pain or feelings can be equated. Lauren Berlant writes, “because the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the non-universality of pain, its cases of vulnerability and suffering can become all jumbled together into a scene of the generally human, and the ethical imperative towards social transformation is replaced by a passive and vaguely civic-minded ideal of compassion” (Berlant 2008, 41). Flattening of all pain into one category, niceness rhetoric is not just about changing the attitudes of the privileged, but also on LGBT people treating straight, cisgender people a certain way- nicely. Of course, allies, as normative subjects, have been trained throughout their lives to expect positive treatment, the standards of what is “nice” vary according to social privilege. In other words, allies often expect better treatment than LGBT people do and are not shy in demanding it.

if you try to follow the whims of oppressive people and “be nice” it always goes something like this

"i hate cishets" no thats not nice you have to be nice “ok… i dont hate cishets but im very upset about the things cishet people done to me and my friends and partners” wow thats a little judgey of you. why does it have to be cishets ”ummm i wish i could have queer representation” WHY DO YOU NEED THAT? WERE ALL HUMAN. WHY DOES EVERYTHING HAVE TO BE ABOUT SEX WITH YOU. WHY CANT YOU JUST ENJOY A MOVIE LIKE A NORMAL PERSON””um”

because guess what. nothing you say is ever going to be nice enough for them. so fuck nice. throw nice out the window. no social movement has ever been about being nice (LGBTLaughs, glowcloud)

This critique of the politics of niceness points out that niceness is often used as a derailing tactic that rejects any sort of LGBT criticism by policing precisely those
negative queer emotions that might spark queer social movement. Affect, in a discourse of niceness, functions to block social movement rather than promoting active political engagement.

**But I have a Gay Uncle**

Affective relationships, such as friendships and kinship, can open the possibility LGBT bodies and relationships rationalizing ally behavior. The care between an ally and an LGBT person can be used to excuse or even prop up ally mistakes or reaffirmation of power. In the case of “Same Love,” Macklemore constructed himself, a straight, cis man, as an ally and was able to produce accepted LGB related culture in part because of the legitimating presence of a supporting lesbian body: Mary Lambert, who sings the hook of the song. I claim no knowledge of Mary Lambert's feelings on the matter, beyond what she has said to the press. However, her position goes beyond her individual subjectivity. Mary Lambert’s presence in “Same Love” demonstrates a wider situating of queer bodies on the margins, and a process legitimating straight people as "good allies" and legitimate voices of LGBT issues through their connection to an LGBT person they know, a friend or family member. This connection is perceived to negate the possibility of their own prejudice or oppressiveness. For Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, these symbols of their morality are their gay uncles, who are mentioned in "Same Love," and Mary Lambert. In a MTV article, Mary Lambert is quoted saying "After we wrote [“Same Love”], I thought of it as Ben [Haggerty, aka Macklemore] being the brain and the pragmatic part of the song, thinking about it intellectually, and I
provided the heart and the emotional spark… And that's what makes an anthem, and I think that's why it's taken off. It's the perfect time for a song to be in the Top 40 that's about gay rights. That's telling of what time it is in our society" (Montgomery 2013).

And it is telling, although perhaps not in the way in which Mary Lambert means to point to. While it is currently possible for a song about gay rights to become popular, “Same Love” is a song about assimilationist goals that is palatable to the average straight person, especially due to its obvious straight perspective. Macklemore expounds upon how he thought he was gay as a small child, but was not. Even Mary Lambert points to him as the intellectual authority, in the aforementioned MTV article. “Same Love” produces a very specific kind of ally culture, with a message that is expected to be internalized in its fans of sameness and equality, even as the song and the relationship between Macklemore and Mary Lambert are reproducing more subtle power relations. As Jasbir Puar points out, progressive narratives do not always correspond with actual disruption of hierarchies: "Sexual exceptionalism also works by glossing over its own policing of the boundaries of acceptable gender, racial, and class formations. That is, homosexual sexual exceptionalism does not necessarily contradict of undermine heterosexual sexual exceptionalism; in actuality it may support forms of heteronormativity and the class, racial, and citizenship privileges they require" (Puar 2007, 9). Macklemore reinforces himself as straight, promotes homonormativity, and even demonizes black homophobia through the lyric “If I was gay, I would think hip-hop hates me.” A predominantly black genre, blaming hip-hop for homophobia both serves to displace
oppression across racial lines, so that they oppressive people are those who are racially unlike Macklemore, and erases existing queer hip-hop.

Macklemore continued to construct a narrative of Puar's American exceptionalism by setting the United States on "the forefront of equality," using the visibility of included homosexual subjects, in his acceptance speech when "Same Love" won a VMA:

I'm going to be honest, ah, I really wanted to win the best rap video, but this right here stands for a lot more… I've been writing songs for, like, since I was 15 years old, and out of every single song that I have ever written, to me this is the most important record out of all of them. And to watch this song in the last year spread across the world is a testament to what is happening right now in America on the forefront of equality. Gay rights are human rights, there is no separation.13

He continued with thanks, followed by Ryan Lewis's, who ended, after listing the musicians playing and others, with what seemed to be afterthought, "Thank you so much, thank you again to all the fans, this means a lot. Of course, Mary Lambert."

Mary Lambert's smile never flagged, and she had hugged Ryan Lewis as Macklemore spoke. But she never got the same opportunity.

This smiling, depersonalized lesbian in the background as two straight men discuss equality points to the systematic inequalities that still exist. Her name is an afterthought, even as her body legitimates their claims. Ally culture serves to obscure the lack of power that Mary Lambert has as she stands on this stage and her reliance on straight allies. But ally culture goes beyond this, to claim that her presence is equality enough, and that a straight man, Macklemore, discussing gay rights is both helpful and progress. Macklemore’s allyship is perceived as a triumph for both LGBT

people, who have now been represented in a top 40 song and on multiple award stages, and for society more generally, as it puts America “on the forefront of equality.”

It is true that Macklemore is publicizing acceptance same sex marriage and is spreading awareness and reaching audiences usually not open to activism; many LGBT voices proclaim this as enough or even as excellent or unprecedented. “Yet,” as Erika Feigenbaum reflects, “here is the thing: heterosexism is not about individuals, or how comfortable or not they are around queers. Heterosexism is about dominance, and the practices that support it are often replicated, reinforced, and reflected by the attitudes, behaviors, and practices of even our best-intentioned allies” (Feigenbaum 2007, 8). And in the moment in which Macklemore does not hand the microphone to Mary Lambert, and does not mention the work and lives of the many queer people that make it possible for him to profit from “Same Love,” he reproduces dominance. Macklemore accepts the award, and through it the position of potential speaker for and savior of the LGBT community. In then claiming that "Gay rights are human rights," he asserts himself, as human, as equally invested and as equally deserving of public opinions, nullifying his own privilege in this discourse and obscuring his potential domination and silencing of LGBT voices.

“Stand and Burn”

The prevalence of niceness rhetoric and sentimentalism encourages positivity as both a tool and an end in itself. Berlant writes that,

To tell the story of sentimental radicalism will be to show how ‘feeling right’ as opposed to feeling ‘cynical’ about change has become embedded in textual
and political conventions whose contradictory bargains with pain, domination, terror, and exile remain the unfinished business of the countersentimental, which refuses to confuse survival with freedom, justice, or the good life (Berlant 2008, 64)

Survival is, here, the end accomplished by sentimentalism; sentimentalism deals with dominant forces, of oppression and pain for minorities, in order to permit these minorities to live. However, in exchange for survival, we are meant to “feel right,” and to understand survival as freedom and as an end to social change, rather than a first step. We are meant to stop fighting for further justice, and stop expressing our displeasure the continuing domination that is meant to buy our survival.

The It Gets Better project, for instance, is combatting LGBT youth suicide, and it similarly encourages optimism and the ideal that surviving is, at least for now, the goal. This is done through “spreading a message of hope” and other emotional tactics, a feeling with those who are oppressed in order to aid them, without necessarily challenging wider systems or excising domination. A four minute long video showing support alleviates the guilt of the privileged and demonstrates that they feel correctly. In return for this sentimentalism from allies, LGBT people are also supposed to be positive and nice.

Yet there is an illogic to the prevalent niceness rhetoric, which I describe as “Not fighting fire with fire.” “Tbh [to be honest] saying something like “I hate cis people” on tumblr isn’t fighting fire with fire, it’s more like saying “I hate fire” while burning to death only to get lectured by said fire about how not all fire is like that and it occasionally keeps you warm” (LGBTLaughs, madokasmagical). More poetically stated, as by Claudia Boleyn, niceness sets up the following dynamic:

When they say: Don’t fight fire with fire.
What they mean is: Stand and burn. (LGBTLaughs, claudiaboleyn)

In addition to merely policing tones, although this is one important function of the vocal outcry against anger and hatred, this rhetoric serves to vilify the process of protesting one’s own mistreatment. Sara Ahmed’s feminist killjoy is the woman who refuses to “stand and burn.” She is loud about her unhappiness. For this, she is not only the one who pointed out unhappiness; she is also considered to be the one who created it. The queer killjoy, similarly, protests against homophobia or transphobia, and for this is branded the destroyer of happiness and of alliance, and even as the one who ruined the possibility of future LGBT normativity.

The policing of tone and understandings of niceness as a crucial aspect of gaining rights and having allies creates LGBT negativity, from criticism to outright hatred, as amongst the worst tactics towards greater equality. Yet there is potential in negative emotions. Heather Love writes, "tarrying with this negativity is crucial; at the same time, the aim is to turn grief into grievance- to address the larger social structures, the regimes of domination, that are at the root of such pain" (Love 2007, 151). She does advocate lingering in these feelings regardless of their utility, both because these are existing experiences and because they might be able to be turned towards justice. Having the opportunity to express negative emotions can be helpful on multiple levels: for instance, commenters point out the need to release frustrations online that they feel unsafe expressing in more embodied sphere. Deborah Gould also points to feelings as both "sites of power" with a "role in regulating political behavior," and as locations to "nourish resistance by prying open ideas about what is to be done and spurring people into action" (Gould 2009, 47). The articulation of
negative feelings on Tumblr allows for validation by an LGBT collectivity, which can spur resistance to not only legal inequality, but also to the ways in which daily treatment, language choices, and even the actions of allies can marginalize LGBT people. Communication of bad feelings between LGBT people can allow for expansion beyond a purely rationalist framework of understanding identity, politics, and social relationships, especially between LGBT people and straight, cisgender people. However, despite these reasons to express negative emotion, many times such comments are completely rejected, especially by self-described allies and by LGBT people who are very invested in receiving their support.

Affect, in ally culture, is instead meant to soothe LGBT hurt feelings as allies express their sympathy for oppressed LGBT subjects. In return, the affect of LGBT people is meant to demonstrate their niceness and desire to work with allies, who can then feel validated in their own goodness. When LGBT people refuse to express the positive emotion that is the expected response to ally support, this entire process ceases to function. The queer killjoy destroys the cycle of happiness that relies upon not pointing out unhappiness, even though such unhappiness already exists (Ahmed 2010b).

When allies or ally-sympathetic LGBT people claim that there is no justification for negative emotions, the importance of discrimination that LGBT people have experienced is denied: their anger is not perceived as a valid response. Rejection of all negativity also serves to excuse future discrimination, as prejudice against LGBT people is then explained by the “hatefulness” of LGBT people, or their refusal to be nice. As Gould points out was happening in the nineties, and as seems to
be occurring in the current era of movement towards marriage equality, "A widespread sense in lesbian and gay community that greater acceptance by society was forthcoming gave discourses against confrontational activism a renewed emotional and psychic force" (Gould 2009 274). The understanding that there is a possibility of greater acceptance, after the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and as more states pass same sex marriage legislation, can lead to discourse between LGBT people that is against criticality and anger, because it might work in counter to this prospect. Negativity threatens the possibility of gay respectability and entrance, at least those who can be respectable, into the sphere of normality. However, negativity also offers the possibility of critiquing current norms in hopes of creating a different society in the future. Idealizing relentless positivity, in opposition to critique, disallows for change, as LGBT people are discouraged from acknowledging their own unhappiness or the actions of allies that might create or reinforce this oppression.

A Place to Start

The goal of allyship may social progress towards greater equality or freedom, especially for LGBT people, but this does not mean that this equality will not be regulatory. Allyship that stifles LGBT voices and encourages assimilation is highly restrictive, and the futures that it presents will be equally limited.

Assimilationist models will always be forced to continue the oppression of some in order to allow for the integration of more normative subjects into the norm, yet only some LGBT people are capable of being coded as “nice” or as “respectable.” Joshi writes, “respectability is thus a system of hierarchy and domination grounded
on distinctions between the respectable and the degenerate… And it is through entwined processes of identification and differentiation, of hierarchization and domination, that claims to respectability are made” (Joshi 2012 419). Therefore, rather than using respectability politics to gain equality, respectability politics are a means through which certain subsections of a minority people might come to join the upper echelon of the social order. In a neoliberal model, this entails consumer-citizenship, homonormative desires for marriage and nuclear family, and race- and class-normative subjectivities (Chasin 2001).

This also necessarily entails the further subjugation of some of the members of the group, and often further policing, by themselves and by others, of those who can manage to fit into a normative mold. LGBT assimilation will require that some queer subjects be abandoned by the LGBT movement. In the current model of assimilation and allyship, these abandoned LGBT subjects will be left behind in favor of gaining more allies, even if “allies” might merely indicate people who vote in a certain way. This model of allyship is part of a larger process of reaffirming existing, normative systems while slowly adding in more people (in other words, a process of homonormativity), while ignoring the flaws in these systems that might require greater change and drowning out more critical voices. Even if allies do everything right according to the current popular rules of allyship, they will still be promoting shifts that are not really in the best interest of many LGBT people.

The homonormative discourse of ally culture is defended and reproduced through discourses of individualism, tolerance, and positivity. These neoliberal discourses serve to obscure structures of power, rather than deconstructing them.
Current forms of allyship participate in and reproduce power structures even as allies clamor for gratitude for their help and use affective rhetoric to deny criticism, and even turn LGBT discourse on its head to insist that they are the ones being oppressed. By insisting that everyone should be equal and that they support tolerance and LGBT visibility and normality, allies unintentionally reproduce systems of privilege and oppression in which they benefit and LGBT people continue to be marginalized.
Conclusion:
What Now?

Allyship was initially meant to be a method of solidarity and coalition building across borders, and might still be defined as such if one is optimistic. In reference to coalitional AIDS activism, Gould writes, “practices of solidarity validated and encouraged defiant challenges to mainstream society’s norms regarding emotional comportment and political activism” (Gould 2009, 205). Yet what if solidarity fails to validate such a challenge? When allies do not support altered norms, they instead prompt movement towards normalization. Instead of standing in support of more socially unacceptable transformation, allies aid in an ongoing shift in LGBT politics towards respectability and assimilation.

In the current model of allyship, when LGBT movement requires difficult, polarizing, or potentially revolutionary action, many self-described allies back down and refuse to participate. Not every ally has the courage, or the conviction, to try to create change. But to call oneself an ally without even desiring or seeing the necessity for more radical change allows for allyship to become almost meaningless. Allyship becomes a numbers game, validated by pragmatic politics that rely on visibility and votes. If an LGBT person’s goals align with the assimilationist movements currently in existence, ally politics might be said to be successful; allies help to win concessions, such as rights to marry, that require widespread support and majority votes. Allyship that simply incorporates as many voters as possible does not require active, in depth support; instead, it only requires an ally to, when asked directly, agree to extend further equality to LGBT people. In this discourse, equality is meant in the
neoliberal sense: an extension of existing individual and market-based rights to a wider group of people.

I don’t believe that many would argue against the point that even vague and infrequent support, such as voting yes for marriage laws or objecting to gay bashing, is better than unapologetic homophobia. But although the existing discourse of “something is better than nothing” may be true, anything “better than nothing” cannot be considered allyship if we wish for allyship to be more than a hollow label, merely serving to legitimate the baseline decency of straight, cisgender people who are not outwardly homophobic. To allow for allyship to lose its meaning, while still advocating allyship as a completely necessary part of LGBT movement towards equality, means catering to all straight, cisgender people in hopes that they might be “allies.” Catering to potential allies then occurs at the expense of certain less palatable LGBT politics or persons.

Current ally politics are deeply intertwined with identity politics, neoliberalism, individualism, and other currently prevalent ideologies. Due to the codependence of these ideologies, allyship could not change as an isolated unit without altering tolerance, diversity, and other neoliberal discourses. In a pragmatic politics using tactics of visibility and assimilation, the current version of allyship makes sense and fits in without challenging the overarching understanding of LGBT goals and equality. Many queer theorists have suggested the need for wide scale overhaul of current LGBT politics without ever mentioning allyship (see Gamson 1995, Muñoz 2009, Love 2007, Duggan 2003). I argue that, in order to truly change allyship towards LGBT people, such an overhaul of neoliberal politics would still be
necessary, due to the ways in which these discourses define allyship. Just as commonly critiqued homonormative politics harm queer people, current ally culture actively harms queer people: ally culture reinforces oppressive discourses, including assimilation, tolerance, and positivity.

**Refusing this Model**

Simply having good feelings is not enough, for allies or for LGBT people. For LGBT people, negativity often means anger, or even sadness. For allies, negativity can often mean guilt for their own place in an oppressive system: “One can no more renounce privilege than one can stop breathing,” and thus we must all come to terms with the fact that we benefit at the expense of others. Recognizing these benefits can result in guilt, and, as Michael Kimmel writes,

> Guilt may be appropriate, even a necessary feeling- for a while. It does not freeze us in abjection but can motivate us to transform the circumstances that made us feel guilty in the first place, to make connections between our experiences and others' and to become and remain accountable to the struggles for equality and justice around the world. Guilt can politicize us. (Perhaps that's one reason why we often resist it.) (Kimmel and Ferber 2003, 9).

Lingering in good feeling can instead depoliticize, as I have discussed at length, and the desire to continue feeling good can contribute to derailing more difficult conversations. It is not a bad thing to be nice, or to feel with or for others. It is understandable, and common, to feel guilty when one acknowledges one’s own position within, and even perpetuation of, systems of inequality. What becomes a problem is when simply acknowledging and feeling guilty about one’s privilege is considered enough: enough to change what’s happening, enough to excuse one’s privilege, enough to legitimate further oppression. In order for any form of allyship to
be effective, we must do more than simply notice inequality. We must invest ourselves into our relationships with those we are allied with, rather than in our own ego-boosting self-descriptions as allies. We must accept that we will make mistakes in our attempts at allyship, and work to not repeat them or expect to be thanked in spite of them.

As mentioned in the preface, I have made mistakes in allyship, and I have felt like there was no action I could take that would not end by furthering oppression in some way. Critiquing allyship, when it does not provoke an outcry of mistreatment, can be paralyzing: such a critique provokes guilt and questions about whether there even exists a good way to do allyship. If I am encouraging allies to accept criticisms and take them to heart, yet there are a range of (sometimes contradictory) expectations placed upon them, how then might they do anything? How can we step carefully while continuing to move forward?

The difficulty in this question is, perhaps, one of the reasons why flawed forms of allyship continue strongly despite the problems that exist within these models and the many critiques of current ideas of allyship. If we cannot formulate a clear plan towards a different model of allyship, then people will follow the layout that is already ready and apparent. The existing ally culture and identity is easier to enact and less potentially painful than a more complex and reflexive alternative. Yet the point of allyship should not and cannot rightly be to do what is easy or to feel good: change will always be difficult and painful, but we admit this and live through this in hopes of a better future.
If allyship and social movement is not about feeling good, it is the job of LGBT people to promote pain. This sounds harsh, but is necessary: if we are to refuse to orient ourselves towards nice relationships with allies, we become queer killjoys, in an echo of Ahmed’s feminist killjoys, who are willing to cause unhappiness in allies.

To be willing to go against a social order, which is protected as a moral order, a happiness order is to be willing to cause unhappiness, even if unhappiness is not your cause. To be willing to cause unhappiness might be about how we live an individual life… To be willing to cause unhappiness can also be how we immerse ourselves in collective struggle, as we work with and through others who share our points of alienation. Those who are unseated by the tables of happiness can find each other. (Ahmed 2010a, 2)

Rather than focusing on those who are already seated, who we hope might move over to give us space, we can instead find other people who are “unseated,” in order to upset the social order. And if an ally may be willing to step down with us, rather than deigning to aid us from above, then perhaps together we may achieve a more desirable end.

Altering the ways in which allies are positioned relative to their identities, as “good” straight, cisgender people and as outside of their own privilege, and altering the ways in which they relate to LGBT communities, as extra support that should be less important than the needs of LGBT people themselves rather than as crucial members of the group, might allow for a different ordering of allyship. If allies could relate to their positions and their emotions in a less individualized and therefore less defensive way, they might be capable of moving beyond superficial, feel-good aid and into a more helpful and less hierarchical form of solidarity.

What Might We Imagine Instead?
Current discourse revolves around ideas of emoting together, feeling comfortable, and being accepted as individuals. None of these ideals seem to be negatives, but they all smuggle into LGBT social movement ideas of neoliberalism and the reaffirmation of hierarchy.

Allies, like LGBT people, wish to find acceptance, happiness, and inclusion. However, they have been socialized into privilege in which these wishes have not been systematically denied to them due to their sexuality or gender normativity. When entering into spaces designed for people who are not them, such as LGBT community spaces, allies do not always bother to question their assumptions that they will be received as important and that their voices will be heard, no matter who else they might drown out in the process.

Therefore, we must ask who is excluded by the inclusion of allies, and what opinions are not heard as a result of the desire for allies. As Andrea Smith writes, “Safe space is not an escape from the real, but a place to practice the real we want to bring into being” (Smith 2013). So should these LGBT sites of community and discourse bow to the demands of allies because it is pragmatic? We must contemplate more fully whether this is the world we wish to bring into being. We could instead imagine a world in which allies consider their stances more carefully, in light of their own privilege, educate themselves, and consult with actual LGBT people. We might even wish for a world in which solidarity comes entirely without the strings and labels of ally culture.
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