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“Dominant and Subordinated Narratives in Queer Communities and the Effects of the ‘Marriage Equality’ Movement”

At the turn of the century, the legal battle for gay marriage in the United States began to gain ground with the legalization of same-sex domestic partnerships in some states and, in others, even same-sex marriage. Within the past decade, marriage has become increasingly visible and publicized, culminating recently in a ‘marriage win’ in four states. For some, the narrative of the modern struggle for LGBTQ rights is centered around the symbolic significance and the civil rights conferred by marriage, with same-sex marriage representing the primary or even single most important modern cause. For others within the queer community, gay marriage is neither a priority nor, for some, even worth pursuing. Other issues, such as AIDS education, the provision of safe shelters and appropriate services for homeless queer youth, and violence prevention may be much higher priorities. How is it, then, that ‘marriage equality’ came to dominate mainstream rhetoric about LGBTQ issues?

To explore this question, and to delve deeper into the narrative about the continuing struggle for queer rights, I am interested in examining the way members of the queer community represent and understand themselves, both within their communities and in the context of ‘mainstream society’ (or, for my purposes, a dominant narrative).

My project has several goals. First, I will conduct a review of several major gay rights organizations’ literature regarding their goals, particularly as they relate to gay marriage. In doing so, I hope not only to understand how these organizations prioritize different issues, but whom they understand to be the constituents of the queer community. Second, I will conduct a similar review of the literature of several local, grassroots organizations, focusing especially on those which serve marginalized people in the queer community (e.g. people experiencing homelessness, queer people of color, queer youth, etc.). Finally, I will conduct interviews with individuals, from representatives of organizations to, especially, the people these organizations seek to serve. To understand the effects of large-scale prioritization of gay marriage, I want to acknowledge both those who benefit from this effort and those who have experienced detrimental effects (e.g. youth experiencing homelessness who have had services reduced because of budget cuts funneling funds toward the marriage ‘push’).

Having come into an understanding of myself as a queer person around the turn of the century, I have been strongly influenced by the push for ‘marriage equality’ and, for years, understood this to be the single most important LGBTQ issue. As a person of great privilege within the queer community (a white, economically secure, college-educated, able-bodied citizen), I have never feared marginalization by the priorities of the mainstream. As an American Ethnic Studies major, I have begun to interrogate my own positionality and question the centrist/assimilationist focus of the dominant voices within the queer community. I aim through my LARC research acknowledge the diverse and often-marginalized voices that exist within and outside the legal battle for gay marriage, and to re-center the narrative of the struggle for queer rights.