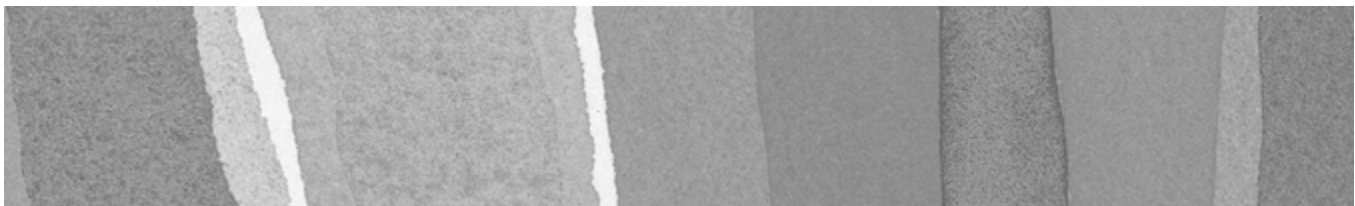


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L/G/B/T/Q and its Discontents: Reflections on Reflections in the Media and in Ourselves **Andrea Weiss**

Recently I was asked to give the keynote speech at a L/G/B/T/Q conference. For those of you who are unsure but afraid to ask, that unpronounceable cluster of letters stands for Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer. The theme of this year's conference was "defining identity," and judging from the string of initials that keeps on growing in response to folks who feel that gay, or gay/lesbian, or gay/lesbian/bisexual or gay/lesbian/bisexual/trans (well, you get my drift) doesn't adequately define them, defining identity seemed to me a worthy goal. Especially for a community that was proclaiming a simple but radical "gay is good" only thirty-five years ago.

Yet what could I say about that elusive notion we call identity?

My own identity, like everyone else's, is so multi-faceted and constantly shifting, that I have trouble even talking about it. Identity is a personal thing, after all, individual to each of us. How could I possibly speak about defining the identity of an entire community—if indeed there exists enough of a common identity to use the term “community”?

And then I realized that this conundrum hints at a large, indeed massive, identity crisis for all who fall under L/G/B/T/Q and those letters yet to be added.

The openly gay African-American author James Baldwin was seeking a place where he could be judged as an individual, not the sum of his various social identities. He moved to Paris, thinking he would find it there, but not even Paris could deliver. I am convinced that half a century later none of us are closer to finding such a place, and perhaps we have even given up looking.

Since the dawn of identity politics, our identity crisis has boiled to these worrisome questions: Have we been succumbing to the lure of a group identity, to the promise of belonging at last, for which we are paying the gradual, incremental price of our own uniqueness? Are we clamoring for “individual rights” just as our individual identities are being eroded by the commercialized cultural conformity and mediocrity that washes over us daily?

I chose to use the term “discontent” in my title in part because James Baldwin's goal of individual judgment, which I share as an openly gay writer and filmmaker, is so unattainable, but also because one of the definitions for discontent is something positive, something optimistic: A restless desire for something better.

Among our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans with which we share more than 96% of the same DNA, social organization is structured along the lines of an in-group and an out-group. Humans have a similar social organization, but these great apes have an advantage over us: they can expand their moral universe and accept new (and different) animals into a porous in-group—the most famous anomaly was Dian Fossey, the activist and naturalist who became part of a gorilla family she was studying in Africa. Her far less accepting human species was so hostile to her for “crossing over” that one could argue they killed her for it. She was hacked to death in 1985 by what local African authorities believe to be poachers.

My sincere hope is that we can learn to expand our own in-group and attempt to break down the rigid dichotomies that rule our social system.

In a society that insists on dualisms—black vs. white, gay vs. straight, male vs. female—it is inevitable that the in-group doesn't feel it needs defining, while it defines the out-group by negation, by what it is not. White people rarely define themselves by their race, straight people rarely by their sexuality.

Whatever we call ourselves—gay, lesbian, queer, transgender, bisexual—one thing is certain: we are not considered the in-group, those who need no definition. We must be defined. Otherwise, we might walk unnoticed among them, steal their wives and corrupt their children. And although many of us may feel we ARE the in-group, we still feel the need to define ourselves, so that we can replace some of that cultural

negativity, that fear and loathing, with a more empowering outlook. But are we being caught in a trap of our own making? To what extent do these definitions actually benefit us and to what extent do they isolate us further?

Despite the gains of the past three decades, there is no question that L/G/B/T/Q people in the United States today feel aggrieved, left out, denied rights.

By demanding our individual right to marry, or adopt children, or get immigration visas, we are insisting that we be allowed to stake our claim in the American dream just like everyone else. It's a contradictory position because it forces us to concede that we are not part of everyone else, not part of the established United States, or we wouldn't be knocking on the door asking to come in. We acknowledge we are different but, really, our positions are modest.

After all, how far would we get if we insisted marriage be abolished as an institution, instead of insisting on the right to marriage? Or if we dismantled the nuclear family as an artificial ideal, instead of insisting on the right to adopt? Or if we demanded a world without boundaries, instead of the same immigration privileges as heterosexually married people? Do we even dare question the omnipotence of marriage, bloodlines, or nationalism as the cornerstones of our society?

Not everyone has a share in the American dream—very few have—but zero-sum identity politics pits us against each other, makes us competing consumers in the marketplace for human rights, where we are afraid there are not enough to go around.

I have to ask myself, with all that is going awry in the world, why did the L/G/B/Q/T community prioritize marriage? Yes, discrimination of any kind is wrong, but there are many more brutal manifestations of discrimination, outside our own immediate comfort zone, we might have concerned ourselves with.

We seem to have abandoned the larger picture, the cooperative connections we could make, and need to make, with parallel public constituencies if we want real change to occur.

Which is not to say identity politics has won no inroads, particularly in the realm of popular media representations. In the span of one century, lesbians have gone from virtual boogymen to hosting morning TV talk shows and being the subject of a weekly Showtime series. Is this a measure of progress?

Of course we didn't have TV talk shows a century ago, so I can't say with complete certainty that lesbians wouldn't have hosted them, had they existed. But in our visually oriented, image-driven contemporary culture, it behooves us to ask: whose definitions, whose images of us, are we embracing, intentionally or unwittingly? What do they offer us? Do they deliver on their promises?

I don't have cable so I checked out "The L Word" at my local video store.

This is what I found: an episode in which a professional tennis player named Dana is told by her coach to stay in the closet for the sake of her career. If she agrees, she will be featured in a big advertising campaign for sports merchandise. Her lover is upset by this turn of events, and Dana is torn between her career and her relationship, yet ultimately accommodates the coach's demand—at which point her lover, furious at her inability to stand up for who she is, leaves her. Finally, when the advertising campaign strategy is revealed—here comes the twist—it depicts her as an "out and proud" lesbian, much to the surprise of all parties involved.

This final scene in the story is interesting because it enacts in microcosm the exact process by which "The L Word" and other gay/lesbian representations have made it into mainstream television: by commodifying our

existence for advertising purposes. Dana feels she has gained a victory, and in a sense she has—she is able to be “out” in her field of professional tennis. But her ability to be out is tied entirely to her effectiveness in reaching a specific consumer group as a product spokesperson.

Back in untelevised, unscripted reality, this the plot twist that stings: watching “The L Word,” we allow ourselves to be sold as a product—a fairly large niche market—by Showtime to its advertisers.

At the same time there is also a much larger niche market being tapped: heterosexual men.

“The L Word” follows many of the same visual codes that have been used by soft porn films produced for male audiences over the past forty years, slightly updated to depict lesbian drama. For example, when the characters Martina and Jenny make love, they are framed through the voyeuristic point of view of Jenny’s fiancé, who is watching them through a window. (And in the ensuing fight, the narrative is positioned to encourage the audience, lesbian or otherwise, to sympathize with the bruised ego of the male character instead of with the woman caught between contradictory desires.)

To keep up with an endless need for programming, media networks are constantly looking for new content. So, it’s not surprising they eventually hit on “The L Word,” “Queer as Folk,” “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” “Will and Grace,” or any other prime time depictions of queer experience. Whether we welcome these images or recognize their expression as having some basis in our lived reality isn’t the point. Programming is just grist for the nonstop media mill and associated gratification factories of consumer culture.

It is astounding to consider how quickly this explosion of gay/lesbian imagery has occurred. In the early 1980s, when I was conducting research for the historical documentary film “Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community,” the absence of images with which to visualize the gay/lesbian past was a problem that manifested itself over and over again. The solution, in part, was looking at images differently, and seeing what was left out. I wrote at the time that, “the process of unearthing a gay iconography involves seeing with double vision. Absence as image. Erasure as image.”

Here’s a specific example. While working on “Before Stonewall,” I learned that in the 1950s, girls’ softball games were invariably where lesbians could be found, on the field or in the bleachers. Even women who weren’t the least interested in softball and didn’t know the rules of the game would come to meet and socialize with the players and each other. Yet for all the newsreels I screened of girls’ softball games in that era, none even hinted at this phenomenon.

The image of women in sports that emerges from these newsreels is in striking contrast with the one described above from “The L Word.” Back then there was no acknowledged lesbian niche market for newsreel companies to pursue (as there is today for cable TV shows), and as such the depiction of girls’ softball games from the Fifties, widely but unofficially known as a lesbian stronghold, was overlaid with heterosexual presumptions. In several scenes, obviously staged for the camera for the purpose of humor, the players appear to be more interested in attracting the attention of the male coach than in catching the ball.

Of course we have long been caught in a hegemonic tug of war with mainstream culture. Long before the advent of television, gay and lesbian audiences at the cinema latched onto selected heterosexual narratives and read into them their own fantasies. In this way, lesbians and gay men subverted the dominant film culture in order to construct their individual and group identities.

The rise of the cinema itself and especially the Hollywood star system in the twentieth century promoted the idea that different roles and styles could be adopted by spectators as well as by actors, and could signal changeable personalities, multiple identities. This novel sense of self was invaluable to the formation of modern gay and lesbian identity.

At the cinema house such fundamental queer experiences as “passing for straight,” cross-dressing and masquerade, butch/femme role-playing, gay slang, and living double lives, were encouraged and legitimized, on the screen and off. Gay and lesbian audiences may have gone to the movies to find romance and adventure, like everyone else, but in a sense they came back with much more.

This most powerful, popular cultural medium in the West for most of the last century, did not lower itself to resemble the everyday life of its viewers, but elevated its viewers to partake in its glamour.

Today television has sunk far below the everyday life of its viewers, and we are blithely sinking along with it. (Of course it must be said that the everyday life of the lesbians in “The L World” is nothing like our everyday life. They all have money and glamour and privilege and youth, and their problems are soap opera problems.)

The number of people lining up at the local multiplex today is insignificant compared with those glued to any number of small screens for video games, web pages, and round-the-clock cable; a theatrical film release serves as a mere advertising campaign for the much more important DVD distribution. Everywhere we look, moving images are competing for our attention, and for our wallet, and we feel flattered to be included in the seduction.

With this explosion of technology and its corollary, an explosion of queer representation, we win something and we lose something. As the insightful film historian Vito Russo pointed out in his landmark book, *The Celluloid Closet*, “We lose that sense of belonging to a secret world to which no one else has access. What we gain... is the reality that fourteen-year-old gay kids in Tulsa will ...not have the idea that they’re the only ones in the world who are gay. A future generation of lesbians and gay men will never know that secret world, and I’m torn between wanting to maintain it and letting it go.”

The Celluloid Closet was first published twenty-five years ago. Vito Russo himself has been dead for fifteen years and the future generation he spoke of has already graduated from college. That moment of indecision has long passed and we weren’t consulted; the relentless forces of capitalism prevailed.

In the past, we looked to mainstream culture and, not finding what we wanted, we improvised. Now there is so much media output that we are placated, saturated, even overloaded; we’ve become increasingly passive viewers, passive consumers of what is allegedly our own representation.

As a producer as well as consumer of media images, I want to end with a more positive, even hopeful message that reflects my discontent, my restless desire for something better.

If we bracket our differences and instead prioritize our common humanity, we might spend less time looking for some ghost of our own reflection in the multitude of LCD screens and more time communicating with each other. We might focus less on forcing our way into the in-group, or insisting that we are the in-group, and more on expanding our moral universe. We have something in common with everyone. We have many social identities at once. And we are more than the sum of them. That is, if we would allow ourselves to be.

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