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## Language, Hegemony, and LGBT Rights

GREGORY SHAFER

“The past isn’t dead; it isn’t even past.”

—William Faulkner

Somewhere in their fight for the basic rights to love and live as they choose, the gay and lesbian communities learned the bitter truth of Faulkner’s prescient quotation. When Faulkner made the statement in the first half of the twentieth century, he was referencing the undying, ubiquitous presence of Southern culture—the patchwork quilt of scars and memories that animated the Confederate states many decades after the end of the war and the reconstruction of the nation. He was considering the many discourses that pulsed through the minds of Americans and the effort by a series of writers, movie makers, politicians, and demagogues to control the narrative about the character of the Southern people and their collective legacy. Were they best captured in the discourse created by movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation* or was their image best illustrated in the voice of Solomon Northup in *Twelve Years a Slave*?

The fact is, our past is never dead but is a socially dynamic entity that is inexorably contested through the social construction of truth. Those Southern writers who created a post-war image of the South as a bastion of simple agrarian farm life understood this. They knew that the future of the South depended on their ability to produce an image that was built on language—on words, metaphors, and images—so they used epithets and phrases like gentleman farmer, Southern honor, and scalawag while promulgating a portrait of the South that had more to do with Jefferson’s apotheosis of the farmer than the abject slavery that was so pervasive.

This brings us to the topic of this article: the language of oppression that has long plagued the LGBT community and the need for intrepid educators to reveal the linguistic and historical reason for centuries of the most virulent homophobia. In much the same way that Southern apologists engineered a propaganda campaign to win the peace, members of the LGBT community have long been victims of a concerted campaign to depict them as pariahs—as anti-American, anti-family, and anti-morality. In most cases these campaigns had nothing to do with any truth but were orchestrated as political strategies, whether it meant creating a quintessential American persona for the new nation after the war against the British, or as a way to solidify power later in the nation’s development.

While my extended examination of the Confederate South may seem irrelevant to a pedagogy of LGBT rights, it offers students a lesson in ideology,

hegemony and how they permeate our thinking. It underscores Brian’ Street’s (1984) contention that all language is ideological, often used not only to communicate but to reinforce a hegemonic system. Of course, we as teachers could focus on any besieged group and explore the otherness that keeps them marginalized. We could look at the lexicon of the white man in reducing Native Americans to savages or we could explore the use of spinster and bitch as a way to create a separate category for women. The point is that students are more easily taught about the injustices of homophobia when they see it as part of a larger act of hegemony that includes not only homosexuals but people of color and of different genders and cultures.

In the same way, teachers at any level are more easily insulated from the accusation that they are promoting a gay agenda—which can be translated as teaching simple compassion and toleration—if they explore hegemony as something that includes many oppressed groups. Students need to see that Faulkner was right when he contended that “the past is not dead; it isn’t even past” and that it constantly resonates in our lives as a contested part of truth.

The fact is, hegemony or the control of major outlets of information and societal control, has been used to convey a certain view of the LGBT

community in much the same way that Southern writers sought to reinvent the perfidious institution of slavery, and it is up to empowered individuals to appreciate this legacy and the way it can and is currently being contested with alternative discourses. With this understood, a look at LGBT rights should begin with a history of America and its institutional antipathy toward difference in general and the LGTB community more specifically. It should document the political uses of language to define people and to create an agenda for certain powerful entities. Students need to appreciate the ideological aspects of language. They need to probe the fact that “hegemony is never simply power imposed from above, it is always the result of negotiations between dominant and subordinate groups; a process marked by both resistance and incorporation” (Storey, 2006, p.65).

The past is not dead. It has centuries of tentacles that extend into the attitudes and policies that government takes toward the rights of those who have been ostracized as the other. This is particularly true for the LGTB community and the way our culture has been conditioned to be homophobic and to embrace that pernicious prejudice. It is the result of an entire vocabulary of words that have been used to define the LGTB population and to limit and marginalize them.

Michael Bronski’s (2011) *A Queer History of the United States* is a wonderful place to start, since it delves into the forming of American culture and the propensity of the deeply religious white European to create an otherness or alienated status for not only women and blacks but also people who were not heterosexual. According to Bronski, American history is rife with examples of homosexuality but such actions are

always condemned or treated as ignominious by a hierarchy that wants to protect its vision of truth and maintain power.

In the case of America, Bronski points to the need for early founders to establish a “firm, masculine authority as the face of the new American citizen . . .” (p. 28). Indeed, in much the same way that the South created a new language and vision for its people, the LGBT community must examine and change the way America endeavored to contrast itself with the English, and, in the process, manufactured a vision of the LGBT person that was anathema to American and its moral values. This started with the need to “invent a new American man who represented all of the virtues of the Republic and had little connection to the Englishman” (p. 29).

This image was clearly not accurate for many who were city dwellers and students of the enlightenment, but the discourse was created to project a very specific image for the new American man—as someone who was “bold, rugged, assertive, unafraid of fighting, and comfortable asserting himself” (Bronski p. 29). In this context, there was a concomitant desire to replicate conventional gender roles for men and women. And so, without ever violating any laws, the LGBT community was relegated to the status of pariah simply because of the ideological discourse of the new nation.

Where did this hierarchy begin? It could be argued that much of the antipathy started when the Puritans moved from England to Boston, hoping in the process to expunge all vestiges of the Church of England in their new “city upon a hill.” Especially interesting about this exodus by the Puritans is their reaction to sexuality, something

that had become more liberal under the Church of England.

At the time of their departure from England, the Puritans had seen Shakespearian plays, replete with cross-dressing men, homoerotic dramas, and bi-racial romances. If the Puritans wanted to clearly delineate their differences from what they saw as a more liberal, more permissive Church of England, it had to first establish a wall that did not allow any of the sexual behavior that the Church of England had condoned. As Bronski argues, “when the Puritans established a religious society in the colonies, they were determined to ensure that its members did not fall prey to the temptations and errors they had left behind in England” (p. 8).

And so, American homophobia, one could argue, was born on the shores of seventeenth century New England. Faulkner’s aphorism that history lives and pervades our lives could not be any truer than in the inception of homophobia and how it was established as a political wedge by the Puritans to separate itself from its mother country.

For students, it is especially revealing to see the ideological character of homophobia or sexual difference. While an entire lexicon of belittling words have been marshalled to persuade society of their social deviance, Puritans sought only to create a difference between itself and the more sinful and salacious Church of England.

From this point, history was being created, was being manufactured with laws and an accompanying language, so that citizens knew that same sex behavior was not simply different from the mores of England but an “abomination.” A language was being crafted to communicate an identity that made any transgressor a sinner and interloper.

The diary of Michael Wigglesworth evinces the strong sense of guilt that homoerotic feelings generated in the Puritan people. As a tutor at Harvard, he wrote in his diary of “such filthy lust flowing from my fond affection to my pupils whiles in their presence on the third day afternoon that I confess myself an object of God’s loathing as my sin is my own” (as cited in Bray, 1997, p. 11). Such self-loathing, which probably wasn’t present in England, was political in nature, created from a government that wanted to distinguish itself from another religion and create its own persona by creating clear differences between them.

With this, then, we see homosexuality being assigned a discourse, a script that prescribed the way people should respond to certain images. In fact, however, the discourse surrounding homosexual behavior did not mean that one was actually engaged in same-sex behavior—only that the person was exhibiting certain behaviors that were part of the new discourse assigned to this societal otherness. “Discourses,” argues Storey (2006), “are social practices in which we engage; they are like social scripts we perform” (p.101).

As America evolved from a religious community to an emerging nation, it established certain images of what an American was and should be. Of course, the first caveat was that he would not be English and that the strong and masculine man would become the quintessential model of America’s free spirit. James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo might have become the first symbol of America, and his natural, uncivilized persona was designed to create a bifurcation between the urban English and the mythic American.

Natty Bumppo was part of an entire collection of American heroes, all

predicated on a discourse that made the ideal man rugged, independent, masculine, and superior. Andrew Jackson becomes president because of his contrast with the bookish and more scholarly John Quincy Adams—who seemed too feminine, too English for many. One decade later, Abe Lincoln exploits his log cabin heritage in promoting the popular idea that great Americans were simple, strong men. Of course, as historians have been loath to admit—since it does not fit the popular script given to them—Honest Abe was clearly bisexual. As Gore Vidal explains:

the young Lincoln had a love affair with a handsome youth and store owner, Joshua Speed, in Springfield, Illinois. They shared a bed for four years, not necessarily, in those frontier days, the sign of a smoking gun—only messy male housekeeping. Nevertheless, four years is a long time to be fairly uncomfortable. The gun proved to be the letters that passed between them when Joshua went home to Kentucky to marry, while Lincoln was readying himself for marriage in Springfield. Each youth betrays considerable anxiety about the wedding night ahead. Can they hack it? (January 3, 2005)

And, of course, one cannot forget the myths of Daniel Boone, Davey Crockett, and Jim Bowie and how they “represented the new American hero” and how their exploits were “mythologized in popular culture masculine adventures” (Bronski, 2011 p. 41). By the beginning of the twentieth century, America was solidly ensconced in a tradition of hyper-masculine, proudly imperialistic discourse, celebrating violence as a way to cleanse others who were either darker or simply different.

Teddy Roosevelt, one of the most popular American presidents, personified the image that America had been told to replicate. He overcame childhood illness to move West and become a cowboy. When the opportunity to steal lands from Spain became available, he engaged in a verbal warfare that made pacifists seem anti-American and joined others in extolling the celestial duties of taking other lands and civilizing their people.

Roosevelt was an avid hunter, killing large beasts in various continents to prove his manliness and when he was shot while giving a political speech, he completed the speech before going to the hospital. “All the great masterful races have been fighting races . . . No triumph of peace is quite so great as the supreme triumph of war” argued Roosevelt before the Spanish American War (as cited in Zinn, 2003, p. 300). In many ways, the script for America was written and distilled in the life of Teddy Roosevelt.

### Helping Students Deconstruct American Homophobia

Most students—whether they be college or high school—have little notion as to how their view of America and themselves as men and women has been created by history and politics. Discourses are social practices that we all engage in, but most discourses are accepted and absorbed by our students. As Sharon Crowley (1989) reminds us, “consciousness does not precede and give birth to language, rather it is language that makes consciousness possible” (p. 4). And so, our male and female students enter class with a vision of what it means to be a man or woman that was inherited from centuries of political machinations.

While they feel empowered in how they see themselves as genders, they often operate in a very circumscribed world that prevents them from acting or expressing themselves in certain ways. The structuralist idea that “language controls us” (Hall, 2001, p. 138) is never more conspicuous than in an examination of the linguistic creation of the LGBT persona. I suggest that any class concerned with LGBT rights begin by broaching the issue of history and language and how gender and sexuality have become part of a hegemonic system that has defined not only men and women but African Americans as well.

After discussing the history of the Puritans and the growth of America as a masculine and white culture, students should be asked to explore the way the homosexual was created. The notion of creating a homosexual is fascinating for those who are not familiar with the theory of social construction but as we take our students through this process—beginning with the binary opposition that distinguished American from English—we begin to see that discourses are ideological constructions that transcend the people they label.

As an example, and as a way to ease students into this uncomfortable issue, it might be helpful to begin by using examples of other groups that have been socially constructed. For instance, in my class, I asked students to examine and deconstruct the word *socialist*. After just a few moments of brainstorming, I asked them to share their responses to this incendiary word—a word that actually has many tentacles to America. One student suggested that socialism is like communism and is anti-American. Another argued that it is connected to welfare and laziness. A third observed that it has to do with government and atheism and is something that “just

doesn’t work.” After sharing, I invited students to examine the many ways that social programs help them and are part of their lives. The schools they learn in, the police and soldiers who protect them, the delivery of mail, and the inspection of their food are all part of social programs that emanate from the government.

In discussing their images and the more deconstructed, more accurate view, students began to see how discourses are realms of power that are produced as ways of creating ideologically convenient hierarchies. As Foucault (2001) argues, “Each society has its own regime of truth, its general politics of truth—that is the types of discourse it accepts makes function as true” (p. 131).

From socialism, students can be taken into the more provocative issue of LGBT rights and the discourses that have created them and impeded their growth as people. First, it is important to see how LGBT rights have been—like the rights African Americans and women fight for—contested over many years and in similar ways. Where homosexual behavior was considered an abomination and seen as anathema to being a good, holy person, our societal construction of the word has also connected it to weakness, femininity, and abnormality.

But are these discourses true? And if not, what is their basis for existing? The next step examining “truth” is understanding how it can limit and ideologically oppressed an entire group of people. In doing this, a helpful first step is media and popular culture. I like to guide students through a history of film and media and how American heroes have been masculine and violent and have tended to follow the script that the early colonists established

when creating a discourse for America. Especially interesting is how this vision of the ideal American does not actually hold true. While Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger and John Wayne are icons of American manliness, there are also signs that America is becoming more open to other images of what it means to be American, to be normal, to be accepted. Further, it is important to explore the issue of otherness and challenge students to see that masculinity is not a binary opposition to homosexuality, anymore than religious principles are. Of course, this begins with action, with marches and alternative discourses that contest images of LGBT members and their place in American culture.

### Modern Family?

How much has the depiction of LGBT people changed in 2015? In asking this question, it seemed logical to examine *Modern Family*, the most popular T.V. show in America. Especially intriguing about this particular sitcom is the gay couple Cam and Mitchell, who are not only married but who have successfully adopted a daughter. In analyzing the discourse created by this show—and in thinking back to how movies like *Gone with the Wind* had changed the minds and hearts of Americans toward the South—I asked students to consider the relationship on the show and how it made them feel about LGBT rights and relationships. In other words, has the long time prejudice against LGBTs waned and become less hostile?

What was interesting is how most students argued that while they accept LGBT rights, they were not impressed with *Modern Family*’s attempt to “normalize” the partnership between Cam and Mitchell. Indeed, Phil, the

one student in my class who described himself as “openly gay,” suggested that the show actually made the hostility toward gays much worse. “Most gay men don’t dress or act that way and they show real affection for each other,” he argued in making his point. “Cam and Mitch have yet to kiss in an episode I have seen,” he later added, and “they tend to fit the flamboyant exaggerations we are used to seeing in gay men.”

Phil’s point goes to the heart of the battle over dominant discourses. In the same way that the South tried to capture the discourse of their legacy as a culture and people, it is up to the LGBT community to control the narrative that defines them as people. “One of the things we must do is redefine ourselves as homosexuals” (Piontek, 2006, p. 60) argues Tony Diaman.

This means that there must be more discussion about the ways LGBTs are portrayed in books, T.V. and movies. It means that progressive thinkers must make a concerted effort to deconstruct homophobic discourses and be politically savvy as to how they undermine the language of equality. To believe that we have turned a corner of progress is to be naïve.

One of the most important works we read during our exploration of language, identity, and the LGBT community involved the work of author Judith Roof (1997), whose essay “The Girl I Never Wanted to Be: Identity, Identification, and Narrative” is a poignant and revealing story of a young and intelligent girl’s rise to adulthood as both a lesbian and an individual. Because in Judith Roof’s world, her personal identity was in a continual fight against “institutionalized identity categories” (p. 9). Roof’s narrative is a personal odyssey through the various ways that identity is an unremitting issue and struggle

in her life. She contests her position as a white woman and the trappings that accompany being a lesbian academic in a university. “What seemed to function as something like an identity was more dependent on a posture of outsidership, of other-then-ness” she writes (p. 9). In short, Roof grapples against group identities that limit and define her, knowing at the same time that such group identities are part of who she is and how she is perceived.

A second essay that one can use to explore the travails of identity and society involves Jewelle L. Gomez’s 1997 essay, “The Event of Becoming, “ a personal and thoroughly enjoyable look at identity formation and the recognition that much of it is linguistically driven

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and beyond our control. Gomez begins her story with a short tale of being called a nigger by a white boy in the neighborhood she was visiting with her parents. The slur, as Gomez tells us, “crushed” her because she had attempted to identify herself simply as an American, seeking an escape from the labels she knew were painful and demeaning. But, as she explains, “I recognized the wondrous spectrum of elements that begin the construction of my identity—lesbian, African American, Wampanoag, Ioway, Bostonian—just to name a few” (p.18).

For Gomez, then, being a Native America, African American, and

lesbian resulted in a life of limitations. She writes of how the language came first and identified her before she had a chance to live, to make friends, to construct her own identity. Her story, then, is a constant fight to avoid reductionist labels—to transcend the culture that defines people before they ever speak. “We are perpetually defining and redefining ourselves,” she declares at the end of her essay. However, she concludes, “to say that I am a lesbian is not the same as saying I am only a lesbian. Identifying myself as a lesbian shifts the emphasis suggesting a place to begin, not a place to end” (p. 21).

Both of these essays galvanized my class to appreciate the essential angst that many of us feel in dealing with our self perceptions and how those perceptions are continually shaped by narratives all around us. As a lesbian certain actions are expected. Our culture tends to limit us as people, using language as a method to define our behavior, our perceptions. The struggle for individuality among a cacophony of voices is what animates the authors and what is most salient in the lives of our students.

The issue of who we are and how much power we have in the creation of that persona is intriguing. Being part of the LGBT community is not a discourse that is congruent with power, and so Lincoln made sure that he was properly married before his attempt to ascend to the presidency. Such decisions were made for Lincoln despite the truth that swirled all around him at the time. Interestingly, students noted that the same discourse was hidden by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who was clearly involved in an affair with his fellow agent Clyde Tolson while persecuting gays and communists and others who were outside of the American lexicon.

Virtually all of my students wrote journal responses to their own resistance to discourses they inherited. “I don’t want to be seen as strictly a gay man,” wrote a student in crafting his response. “There was so much that is foisted upon me once I came out of the closet, like I was even less of an individual.” A second student wrote, “Being a woman leaves me with limited ways to define myself because the roles and expectations are already there, waiting to be fulfilled.”

### Michigan’s Religious Homophobia

One of the most instructive lessons to be taught about language, ideology, and LGBT rights should involve the legislature of a specific state. In Michigan, LGBT rights have been assailed for decades and are presently being attacked under the guise of religious freedom. Again, students might be sensitive as to their own religious affiliations, so teachers must delve into this issue with an eye toward the use of language as a way to gain power. There is no question that the latest ploy to limit the rights of LGBT citizens has been packaged as a way to protect religious liberty, but one must also see it as an act of discrimination, as the legislation that allows people in Michigan to refuse service to LGBT patrons based on religious objections. Such legislation was once used to prevent African Americans from enjoying their basic rights and is interesting in how religion is again being employed as a way to disaffect a group of marginalized people.

As part of my advanced composition class at Mott Community College, I asked students to read and discuss the myriad reports on what is called the Religious Freedom and Restoration Act

and the revealing demagoguery used to advance it and package it as acceptable discourse. Before and during the class analysis, I reminded students of the religious basis for Puritan’s harsh acts of discrimination and the way LGBT rights were eviscerated. In defending the law—which would allow people to discriminate against LGBT citizens based on religious conviction—House Speaker Jase Bolger said, “What I ask of you is that we continue to respect and protect the principles upon which this country was founded” (as cited in Oosting, 4 December 2014, p. 1).

In deconstructing the Religious Freedom and Restoration Act, students were quick to recognize how adeptly the discriminatory behavior was shrouded in language that made it seem as if it were protecting rights rather than taking them away. “The entire law is misleading,” replied one student. “This has nothing to do with restoring rights, since there is no evidence that any religious rights were taken away.” Added a second student, “The law takes rights away while claiming to be protecting them.” And, of course, many in the class identified the reference to religious “principles” and smiled. “Our religious principles were to persecute difference and now they are being presented as a way to defend it,” added many in the class.

Such observations can lead to important discussions about hegemony and the appropriation of certain words that lead to a control of the primary discourse that a society follows. Language creates truth, and many students realized that the Michigan legislature—at least some of them—was engaging in yet another act of hegemony and discrimination by controlling the discourse and by appropriating certain words and using them to define the meaning

of their acts. How could one oppose a law that protects and restores religious rights? Of course, this isn’t what the law does—any more than the Patriot Act was patriotic—but language is often what defines our perspectives. Students become better students and citizens by seeing how the “regimes of truth” are established by power. (Foucault, 2001, p. 113).

At this point, I introduced words like dominant discourse, reproduction, resistance, and false consciousness. Fortunately, most students can recognize how a dominant discourse is being produced and how this could lead to a false consciousness among those who do not delve into the real meaning and implications for these words and phrases. And, of course, the only way to stop reproduction is to resist, to take control of language and expose the machinations being imposed on society. “It is a lie or dominant discourse that is being planted by a powerful elite that seek to control the oppressed group they are trying to keep down. And their primary tool for doing this is language,” wrote one student.

If we are to teach our students about the struggle of LGBT groups to attain basic civil rights, we might do this most effectively through language, since language is what creates our truths and guides our lives. By approaching this topic through language and rhetoric, we, as teachers, can avoid the accusation that we are taking a political stand or advocating for gay rights, which seems unacceptable in today’s conservative world.

By ushering students through a history of homophobia and hegemony, students see the connections between LGBT groups and other marginalized people. They identify the duplicitous language, the reproduction of

oppression, and the need to transcend a false consciousness. “Underpinning progressive language practices,” argues Dudley-Marling and Edelsky, “is an understanding that language creates social identities, reproduces relations of power, and constructs realities, as well as recognition of the power of language to enable (and disable) people in their efforts to live rich, full lives” (2001, p. x). In short, they learn that the past is not dead. It is not dead for many Southerners in North America and is clearly not dead for the LGBT community, which must become adept at using language in their quest to be treated as people.

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