

## Emerald City Queer

“These kids, they don’t even want to get married,” Exclaimed James Lecesne with surprise as we met for coffee last January in Seattle, WA. Lecesne is the founder of the nation’s first lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) suicide prevention hotline, the Trevor Project. As is often the case when two queers get together these days, the topic of gay marriage had inevitably come up. With the recent passage of Referendum 74, legalizing gay marriage in Washington State, this topic seemed particularly relevant. Over the previous months, Lecesne had traveled around the country talking with many LGBTQ people and was astonished to discover that not everyone shares his belief that the expansion of marriage equality laws around the country is a victory for the LGBTQ movement.

What Lecesne, and many LGBTQ folks are discovering is a new subculture that has emerged here in Seattle and across the country challenging many of the basic assumptions, practices, and goals of the mainstream LGBTQ movement. Nowhere is the divide more prevalent than in the opposing views on gay marriage. Questioning the narrative of gay marriage as the natural next step for LGBTQ rights, this new subculture suggests that marriage equality is at best a distraction and at worst a step backwards for the gay liberation movement. Calling themselves “Queer”, they are the latest manifestation of a struggle that has been waging within the LGBTQ civil rights movement from its inception.

*(Note: in this essay I will use the capitalized “Queer” to refer to this particular subculture and will use a lowercase queer [or LGBTQ] as a catch-all phrase referring to anyone who is either not straight or not cis-gendered, meaning someone who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth.)*

The history of modern queer politics in the US, can be viewed as a struggle between two political strategies and correlating cultural values. The first is assimilation, which Simon Moritz described in a Huffington Post article, *What I Learned From Gay Sex: Misogyny and Homophobia*:

*...60 years ago queer role models fought for the right to exist in public or private. To gain those rights, they used an effective strategy called assimilation, which dictated that queer people look and act as much as possible like straight people.*

Although this was, in part, a survival tactic, it was also based on a moral belief of many gays and lesbians. It was argued that LGBTQ cultural and political institutions should fit within straight, mainstream values. The only difference, assimilations contended, between gay folks and heterosexuals was whom they sleep with. (Early lesbian and gay politics did not account for transgender people, many of whom are straight.) We can see how this logic would lead to the modern marriage equality movement, which proposes, like straight folks, the highest forms of LGBTQ love should be expressed through the institution of marriage.

In late June 1969, assimilationist politics were challenged in several nights of violent protest, known as the Stonewall Riots. This event, and the organizing that followed, marked a drastic divergence from the politics of sameness characteristic of assimilationism. In part, this was a result of the leaders of the uprising. The Stonewall Riots were led predominantly by drag queens, sex workers, and butch lesbians, many of who were people of color and who would not have been welcome at early gay or lesbian protests.

One major shift, was the understanding that distinctly queer cultural practices and spaces existed, were important, and worth struggling to protect. LGBTQ people were not just straight people who slept with someone of the same gender, but had distinct ideas about community, gender, culture, and politics. Furthermore, it was believed that the new gay liberation movement should seek to address many of the social ills that plagued mainstream straight and LGBTQ society alike, such as racism and sexism.

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In Seattle, on the third Thursday of every month, you can find the inheritors of this tradition taking their clothes off for money and a new sense of beauty. Debauchery, a project of Lily Devine Productions, describes itself as “queers stripping for queers in hot, anti-oppressive space, raising money for organizations that serve the queer community.” A roommate first brought me to Debauchery a year ago and I was amazed at the diversity of bodies and body parts I saw. Founded in Oakland in 2005 and started up in Seattle 2 years ago, Debauchery presents sexy performances by queer bodies not commonly described as beautiful in mainstream LGBTQ or straight cultures.

That all people should be seen as sexy, however their bodies look, is a radical departure from mainstream gay and straight notions of beauty. Generally, these boil down to being as thin as possible, as white as possible, and as able bodied (lacking any physical disability) as possible. In keeping with assimilationist politics, most mainstream LGBTQ media promotes this understanding of what is attractive. Shows like Queer as Folk, The L Word, and Will and Grace all feature characters who fit this description. In opposition to this, Debauchery declares that fat folks, people of color, and disabled persons can be sexy on their own terms.

Expanding on this, Queer culture goes further, rejecting all gender, sexual, and relationship hierarchies common among LGBTQ and straight mainstream cultures. There are as many genders, sexualities, and desired relationship structures as there are people, believe most Queers, and each one is as legitimate, loving, and real as any other. The only valid criteria for judging other’s choices within Queer culture are is, does someone freely choose it and does it hurt another person?

Within these cultural values, the fight to legalize gay marriage takes on a problematic light. Many Queers argue that the legal institution of marriage is coercive, forcing people into a particular kind of relationship in order to gain necessary benefits and privileges.

For example, people might feel forced to marry someone for medical benefits or hospital visitation rights, without any desire to actually marry that person.

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In March 2011, the City of Seattle gave \$100,000 grant supporting the formation of Queer Youth Space (QYS). A year and a half later, the space on 911 E Pike opened its doors. As a youth-led arts and activist space, QYS seeks to provide a place where young LGBTQ people can empower themselves.

Although QYS takes the more expansive definition of the word “queer,” referring to anyone either not straight or cis-gendered, it holds many of the same values as the specific Queer subculture. “Liberation from racism, classism, sexism... ; breaking down norms that define our behavior; (and) breaking down hierarchy (sic),” are all stated values and all reflect an alignment of QYS with the basic Queer tenant that people should be supported in living the lives they want.

However, like Debaucher, QYS recognizes that it is not enough to just say or believe it. There are institutions and systems that actively prevent people from fully realizing the freedom of Queerness. Racism, classism, and sexism are all examples of systems that restrict people and which QYS challenges through conscientious hiring practices and spaces for specific marginalized populations. Furthermore, QYS provides a safe space for youth to explore their various identities, normalizing the changeability of gender and sexuality.

This understanding of fluidity is a central tenant of most Queers’ understanding of sex, gender, and relationship structures and a key criticism of gay marriage. Through marriage’s coercive use of legal rights and privileges, it can force people into a relationship structure that is limited in its ability to change overtime. Once married, people are expected to maintain the same kind of relationship until they die.

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Queer poetry blew my mind. In November 2010, I was beginning to come out as trans when another housemate brought me to the Bent Mentor Showcase. On stage, I watched a procession of the most fabulously fierce LGBTQ people read poems and stories about what it means to survive and thrive outside of the great straight dream. We all know this fantasy, it is the one where everyone gets married, has two point five kids, a dog, and a white picket fence. There were tales of hiking the Appalachian Trail in a skirt; accounts of gay bashings and gays bashing back; and poems of love and sex on hot Paris nights when the boys, like the statues, were wet with dew. Not everyone’s idea of a good night, but I was entranced. It was all I had ever hoped for for my community and myself. It was Queer through and through and I loved it. (Full disclosure, I previously worked for Bent Arts.)

Bent Arts is the nation's first queer writing school. Founded in 2000, by a local Seattle poet, Tara Hardy, Bent seeks to empower all LGBTQ people and to celebrate queer writing. Taking an expansive view of queerness, Bent is a school for anyone who chooses to identify as "queer." In recent years this has come to include straight people who are interested in viewing their sexuality and gender as something more than set in stone.

One of the interesting things about Queerness, is its effort to redefine what belongs within the identity and what does not. Traditionally, in LGBTQ communities, belonging has been based on strict sexual and gender identities. Men who had sex with men were gay. Women who had sex with women were lesbian. Even in older notions of queerness, having sex with someone of the same gender identity was a requirement. Straights were not welcome. (Again we must recognize the invisibilizing of trans people in much of mainstream queer culture.)

In Queer communities, these restrictions are being redefined. Values and political beliefs are much more important criteria for acceptance within Queerness. Straight people who respect the Queer notions of fluid, non-hierarchical sexuality, gender, and relationship structures are welcome.

Like many Seattle Queer institutions, Bent seeks to wrestle with power and privilege in society at large and within LGBTQ communities. In their mission, Bent states a desire:  
*...(To) create a safe space for all artists and encourage underrepresented voices by incorporating social justice and anti-oppression values into our curricula and organizational policies.*

The openness of Bent's definition of "queerness" is, in part, a result of this goal. Historically, because of restrictive definitions of what it meant to be gay or lesbian, many people did not fit into either straight, lesbian or gay community and were forced to fend for themselves or find like mind misfits. Through using the word "queer", and endowing it with an expansive definition, "you are if you say you are", Bent seeks to dismantle much of what has come to be known as "identity policing." This is when a person or group attempts to say who can or can't identify as a particular identity and is generally regarded as poor form in many Queer communities that seek to support all people's ability to identify as they see fit.

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Queer folks are attempting to reimagine what it means to be LGBTQ and straight, for that matter, by recognizing the ways current social norms and legal policies restrict people's freedom. Instead, Queers propose a politics and culture that supports people's ability to choose from the unlimited possibilities of gender, sexuality, and relationship status without fear of prejudice. The need to assimilate for safety or privileges is understood as antithetical to Queerness. Legal marriage, with its vast web of legal and economic rights, makes it hard for people to choose other forms of relationship status. Instead of forcing people fit themselves into mainstream norms and laws, Queers attempt to build politics,

cultures, and spaces which leave room for a wide range of identities, while recognizing systems of oppression at play in our society.