Talking identity in the public sphere: Broad visions and small spaces in sexual identity politics

PAUL LICHTERMAN
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Must identity politics devolve into group selfishness? Can people make political claims *as* African-Americans or *as* lesbians without narrowing their concern for the greater good? Theorists of multicultural democracy envision public-spirited citizens and activists who could engage issues across differences of identity while also articulating specific identity-based claims.[1] In this normative view, women volunteers at feminist community centers, African-American programmers at black radio stations, or lesbian and gay activists at pride parades, need not cultivate one identity at the expense of other identities or the public good; identity politics[2] and inter-identity politics need not be mutually exclusive. In the multicultural, democratic ideal, citizens converse critically[3] with, sometimes identify with, varied identity groups in varied places. They avoid narrow horizons – not by speaking as generic members of society, but by speaking from specific identities all the while receptive to others' identity claims. These multicultural citizens might speak *as* African-Americans *in support of* lesbian and gay rights, rejecting a false choice between pursuing "essential" group interests and upholding a generic common good. Collaborators in a challenging, multicultural kind of public virtue, these citizens would relate to their own group identities multivalently. They would practice what William Connolly has called an "ethos of critical responsiveness," willing to rethink their own identity claims in the context of an unfolding, democratic drama.[4] In this vision, multicultural citizenship invites creative, not destructive, tensions between specific identity claims and concern for the greater good.[5] To understand how actually existing groups manage these tensions, we need a close, sociological look at identity talk.

This article illuminates conditions that encourage more multivalent, critically reflective identity talk in some settings, and more univalent,

Theory and Society **28**: 101–141, 1999.
© 1999 *Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.*

narrowly affirming identity talk in others. My goal is to understand possibilities and limits in visions of active citizenship that highlight public-spiritedness *and* diverse identities. Toward that end, it advances a framework for studying identity talk. I found that members of a sexual minority (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, "lgbt")[6] activist group, called Queer People (QP), could talk in an open-ended, self-critical way about lgbt identities and interests at their meetings and events. They could explore and critique lgbt interests with an eye toward other identities – those of gender and class, for instance. When those same members participated in the coalition-building network that they initiated (Network Against the Right's Agenda,[7] or NARA), they and other NARA participants entertained much less multivalent identity talk. In this larger, multi-group arena, they more often took sexual minority interests as self-evident, and focussed on those interests apart from others. In NARA settings, participants worked more on convincing other "gay community" members of a unified gay interest than did people in QP settings. Why was the character of discussion in NARA so different from that in QP, when QP members had initiated NARA and contributed some of its core members? Why did a multivalent relation to identity get squeezed out of the anti-right network?[8]

It might seem easy enough to explain the puzzle of shrinking critical space in terms of what the "real world" of politics requires: The pressures of coalition-building might make people prize different, more "practical" kinds of talk than they would within a single protest group that could talk on its own time. Perhaps QP participants wanted a separate space for talking through their identities, leaving the strategic business of politics for other settings. Maybe QP activists simply needed to promote a unified gay interest to unite lgbt people against outside adversaries. In this article, we see, however, that it is inadequate to use organizational imperatives or strategic interest to account for the difference between QP's and NARA's identity talk.

Alternatively, space for critically reflective talk, at least in NARA, may have been the victim of culture wars[9] raging between celebrants of particular identities – be they gay, queer, Afrocentric, feminist – and proponents of cultural unity. Conservative and liberal or left versions of the culture wars thesis favor different groups as protagonists of cultural unity. But both versions assume that public advocacy on the basis of a particular group identity will tend to narrow the group's horizons of public concern. While culture wars may not be engaging many Americans in general, activists and professional publicists may

have enlisted to fight cultural battles;[10] whether or not culture wars rend public life in the U.S. is a large question beyond the bounds of my discussion. What matters most here is that the war metaphor makes it hard to imagine that combatants could ever have been ambivalent about identity, or partial to many identities simultaneously. Neither does the war metaphor sensitize us to importance differences between the identity politics pursued in groups like NARA and QP.

At stake, though, is more than the puzzle that QP and NARA present: We need a conceptual framework to investigate the question about solidarity across identities that rightly concerns critics of identity politics as well as the normative theorists of multicultural democracy. That framework must help us distinguish the more critically responsive, engaged kinds of identity talk from the more narrowly partisan or single-minded kinds. The concept of the public sphere can start us toward making this distinction empirically tractable. The next section extends the public-sphere concept in order to investigate identity talk in everyday settings. I show that there are *culturally* structured ways of talking identity in the public sphere. Following sections show how these cultural structures worked in QP and NARA, and why the activists switched from one cultural structure to another when they moved into the larger arena of coalition-building. These illustrations show the difficulties in using putative pre-given interests, or organizational imperatives, to explain the different ways people in each group related to identities.

Studying identity talk in the public sphere

Grassroots movements as forums

Multicultural democracy theorists take off from Habermas's classic articulation of the public-sphere concept. Like Habermas, they put great importance on the social settings in which people can debate issues and revise their own opinions openly and self-critically – "publicly" in Habermas's sense. But multicultural appropriations of the public-sphere concept substitute the notion of multiple public spheres in place of a generic "sphere"; they hear voices of diverse identity groups rather than the generic citizen voice conjured in Habermas's original formulation.[11] Sociologists such as Calhoun, Schudson, Somers, and others share with political theorists a conceptual interest in public spheres.[12] Adding to this growing sociological inquiry, I ask how much

interactional space identity groups allow for discussing opinions freely, and for discussing critically the varied identities that activists claim.

I define this space as the "forum" quality of a group. A group contains a forum to the extent that it values critically reflective discussion about members' interests and collective identities, apart from strategizing identity and interests to gain more members or influence. To the extent a group is a forum, members converse and learn together as an end in itself – in order to become richer participants in public life. The forum shrinks if members come to assume that their collective interests and identity are obvious and need not be discussed, or if they talk only to strategize the way they present presumably shared identities or interests to others. Participants in NARA, for instance, sometimes talked as if religion in public life was inevitably contrary to lgbt interests. Rather than opening the issue itself to question, they would talk about how to present their own interest – *presumed* to be contrary to public religion – in the most strategically effective way.

We often think of social movements as sites for strategic talk about how to meet political goals. Certainly activists need to talk about strategies and tactics. Leaders also strategize the way they present their movement's public face, in order to appeal to newcomers; recent studies illustrate these processes.[13] But as authoritative reviews imply, communication within dissenting groups involves more than strategic talk about tactics and self-presentation.[14] Theoretical and historical work recognizes that social movements have been crucial sites for Americans to discuss new opinions and try out new identities even apart from strategizing to gain power or resources, or new adherents.[15] As Richard Flacks has argued, one of the major "effects" of grassroots movements in U.S. history, especially on the political left, has been to hold open spaces for non-elite citizens to try out dissenting opinions, learn critical viewpoints, or re-think their own identities as citizens. In a society that privatizes many key economic and political questions, grassroots social movements may offer some of the few settings in which citizens can learn to articulate unpopular viewpoints at all; put differently, cultural norms of privatism may propel people who discuss those viewpoints into public activism.[16] The forum concept, then, keeps us from assuming that important talk within a social-movement milieu must always be strategic talk.

"Forum" denotes an analytic lens, then, that sensitizes us to kinds of interaction that may occur in a variety of movements or civic groups.

The "forum" lens of analysis requires probing everyday conversation as it unfolds in naturally occuring settings, for the open-ended, self-reflective interaction that both classic and multicultural democratic theory upholds. As Eliasoph argues, we need to probe separate settings carefully because the same people may allow themselves more room for critically reflective talk in some settings than others. Among the burgeoning studies of movement identity, Alberto Melucci's work in particular emphasizes the importance of face-to-face negotiations of identity.[17] Empirical studies are just beginning to focus on everyday discussion in movement groups, and few have compared natural conversation across settings.[18] This study probed interaction in everyday settings for the ways activists talked through, or avoided talking about, "ascribed" identities – racial, gendered, or sexual, for instance. I found that identity talk was culturally structured.

The cultural structure of identity talk

Previous work suggests that different forms of togetherness shape different opportunities for critical, mutually respecting talk.[19] Put simply, how people connect themselves to one another influences what they can say to each other. I extend this insight here and apply it to identity politics. The following three analytic points are the core of my approach:

First, solidarities differ qualitatively as well as quantitatively. We tend to say that a group has "more" or "less" solidarity. But forms of togetherness are also cultural; they are *meaningful* in different ways, apart from whether they are strong or weak in terms of group members' willingness to take risks for each other. Different solidarities enable people to define different kinds of responsibilities to one another, not just "more" or "less" responsibility. The bonds between "fellow members of the community," for instance, often would *mean* something different from the bonds between people who treat each other as "fellow seekers." Second, solidarities link together the social identitites from which people speak.[20] People who all speak from the social identity of "member of the gay community," for instance, can see themselves as carrying "communal" responsibilities that would not be meaningful in a group whose members do not identify as part of a unitary gay community. And third, social identities are relational: people carry and speak them in relation to an array of institutional or cultural reference points – "the gay community," "the radical Christian

right," "the progressive community," for instance – that make those identities meaningful.

In QP and NARA settings, participants mapped themselves amidst different reference points in the wider society, and took on a different social identity, even though in *both* settings they shared an interest in fighting the right. Carrying different social identities, they created different forms of solidarity that in turn reinforced those social identities. The solidarities and social identities worked in tandem as routine, often taken-for-granted ways of doing activism. Those routines structured what activists could discuss critically, and what they needed to affirm without comment or else suppress so as to avoid threatening group solidarity and members' identities. Sociologists of culture increasingly argue that culture itself is structured; those structures enable and constrain what people can say and do together.[21] We can think of the two interactional routines of solidarity and social identity in this study as two cultural structures that shaped identity talk. I call one of these interactional routines "personalized politics," and the other "community interest politics."[22] I argue that the switch from personalized to community interest politics changed the conditions for identity talk. And the switch came about because of the activists' shared understanding that "real" politics ought to be about action, separate from talk.

The methods, the groups, and the researcher

I spent a half-year as a participant-observer, mostly observing, in both QP and NARA settings. I also interviewed twenty members involved with one or both groups, including nearly all of the most active participants in each group. I read the group newsletters and flyers that appeared during the study, along with issues of the local, lgbt newspapers. The bulk of my argument about identity talk rests necessarily on everyday conversation I heard at QP and NARA general meetings, task group meetings, and community events. I listened carefully for the ways the activists identified themselves in QP and NARA settings. I took note of the institutional and cultural reference points in relation to which they carried those identities. I attended to the ways the activists maintained bonds of togetherness with other group members and imagined allies.[23] Excerpts of conversation below come from field notes unless otherwise specified.

QP was a grassroots protest and education group formed in an urban area in 1993. QP's newsletters characterized the group as "people of all sexual orientations fighting heterosexism, hatred and bigotry" and "promoting equal rights for queers through networking, organizing, and direct action." Out of several hundred people on the mailing list, a stable core of roughly twelve went very regularly to QP's weekly meetings, in a spare room atop a narrow, rickety staircase on the second floor of an lgbt community center. Several visitors new to the group, including a reporter and a liaison from another lgbt group, attended a meeting during my study. Local lgbt leaders were familiar with QP, and sometimes invited its representation at "community" policy discussions. Most of QP's core members were concurrently active in other lgbt groups or projects, but considered QP an anchor of their public lives and a fixture on their weekly calendars. Core members were in their twenties and thirties, mostly white, and mostly college-educated. In an interview, a founding member said QP stepped into a vacuum left by more conventional lgbt leaders when the group went "out there, building, real organizing," gathering names of supporters for future campaigns. QP's first group event was a sit-in protest advocating domestic partners legislation. Some QP core members worked hard for a city council candidate during my study. QP sponsored a variety of events in its first two years – lgbt community organizing, protest actions, lgbt visibility events like the "queer Christmas carolling" described below, and discussion forums, including night-time discussion and entertainment "cafes" that each attracted over one hundred people and received favorable lgbt press coverage.

QP formed in the context of embittering local events and a sense of impending dangers at the national level. QP's two founding members decided to start the group because, as one put it over the phone, the "gay and lesbian on the street" had little say in local lgbt politics. Established, local lgbt institutions, and a small group of gay businessmen in particular, "made decisions for" lesbian and gays without being accountable, he declared. QP situated itself ambivalently, then, in relation to a local "gay community" that was sizeable enough to support two freely distributed lgbt weeklies and a cluster of lgbt bars and services, and established enough to have evolved what QP members considered to be an entrenched elite with powerful connections in the state capital. QP certainly did not displace lgbt business or civic elites, but in its first two years it did succeed in becoming a recognized, sometimes consulted grassroots voice, a player in lgbt civic life.

QP members situated themselves far more unambivalently against the political right and particularly the Christian right, whose power they assumed to be growing, especially after Republicans sweeped Congressional elections in November 1994 and brought a vocal cohort of social conservatives to Washington. Locally, several clergymen had become visible spokespersons for theologically conservative views on homosexuality and other social issues. Anticipating political set-backs nationally and fearing a chilling climate locally, QP members had already begun planning NARA early in 1994, making contacts and holding public meetings about the political right. The goal was to create coalitions of lgbt and non-lgbt left-liberal advocacy groups. At NARA's inception, members said they were not aware of any other lgbt-initiated, grassroots networks in the U.S. formed to address a spectrum of right-wing initiatives besides ones directly related to sexuality. NARA's creation was not a direct reaction to any single political event, then; members had given themselves time to feel their way outward toward multi-identity political projects.

During my study, NARA initiated coalition-building with lgbt social service-providing groups, a non-lgbt abortion-rigths group, and a civil liberties group, and began outreach to a welfare-rights organization and some local pastors. NARA quickly evolved working groups devoted to youth, religious affairs, welfare policy, and information collecting about the right. Participants at the various NARA meetings I attended included QP members, people who identified as "queer" but did not attend QP meetings, and a mix of other, largely lgbt people including several lgbt youth-group workers, two leaders of a lesbian and gay voters' league, a gay male employee of a civil rights group, a member of a lgbt parents support group, a leader of a black gay men's service group, and an administrative specialist. Working groups could act in their own name, but their representatives made decisions for NARA's direction as a whole by consensus at monthly meetings. Most of NARA's early accomplishments involved specifically lgbt issues: NARA sponsored a forum on lgbt youth, two educational workshops directed largely to lgbt people, and a lgbt voter registration drive that members judged a success. Social backgrounds in NARA differed from those in QP mainly in the participation of a few people of color. Similar to QP, one of NARA's main goals was to develop a local presence apart from winning specific campaigns, only NARA hoped to speak directly to, and give voice to, some non-lgbt as well as diverse lgbt constituencies. Early accomplishments notwithstanding, NARA's first six months suggested this was a challenging mandate.

Studying identity-based groups with an outsider's identity invites various dilemmas of representation that are worth a brief comment here.[24] Having introduced myself as a researcher, I maintained a friendly, respectful, and largely observer stance reflecting how I experienced the groups. Of course I talked informally with the activists after meetings, and I enjoyed the zippy humor of QP. By welcoming a researcher who did not identify as gay or queer, the activists showed their public-spiritedness and their willingness to believe that an outsider might represent them fairly and complexly. There are limits to what an outsider can hope to represent about identity, and how. This study represents how people wear identities in public. Depending on its purpose and genre, an account of the private experience of identity – whether sexual or other – might call for a different sense of limits. But if we say that identity politics, the "politics of recognition" as Charles Taylor has called it, can be recognized properly only by researchers who fully share the identities of the researched, then we are saying that multicultural citizenship should not apply to scholars. In contrast, I affirm the vision of a public-spirited, multicultural democracy whose members respect differences, encourage a recognition of commonalities, and keep open a space for critical reflection on both for the sake of democracy itself. I offer the arguments below in that spirit.

Talking as queers

A queer forum

At the first Queer People meeting I attended, I expected to hear the angry, incivil talk described by critics of radical identity politics. The word "queer," after all, is a badge of convention-busting gay politics that suits only those strident enough to reappropriate what many people, lgbt or straight, would consider a nasty epithet.[25] I expected to hear "in-your-face" lesbians and gay men railing at straight society – and wary of me. I was surprised, and fascinated by my faulty expectations.[26]

QP participants enacted "queerness" in style as well as in explicit talk *about* queer identity. Snappy repartees, ironic commentary on "gay"-identified sensibilities, playfulness with language: these were styles of talk that QP members collaborated in producing at QP meetings, though not at other meetings QP people attended. Any groups or topics, including lgbt-related groups or topics, could be grist for the

irony mill. As Rita joked to me during my first meeting: "You'll note that queers get bitchier as the night goes on." At a queer Christmas carolling session, Tom glanced around at shoppers ambling through an upscale mall: "Look at all these fags shopping here!"

Or in another example, Aaron, Rita, and Brian were planning a QP-sponsored lgbt celebration in a city park. As they talked through the entertainments they planned, they spoofed canards about gay men's supposed aesthetic sensibilities and poured irony on the countercultural "1960s" sensibility that this park event was celebrating half tongue-in-cheek:

> Aaron: "We can have 'new games!' There is a whole book of them."
>
> Rita to Brian, teasing: "You don't like competition, do you?!"
>
> Brian: "I don't like competitive games (spoken slowly, in a spacey voice, in parody of a drugged hippie). I want something nice and cooperative."
>
> Lauren: "We can have Twister, that would be so cool!"
>
> Allen: "We can paint one with pink flowers and green centers."
>
> Rita (in mock derision): "That's so GAY!"
>
> Allen (in mock befuddlement): "What do you mean by gay?"

To speak as a queer, then, was to relate to sexual identity – to carry it – in a certain way: Queer signified being visibly "out" about one's sexuality, and being outspoken, willing to poke loud fun at pieties of either straight *or* lgbt existence.

Unlike some other subcultural or counter-cultural groups that have also made style into a statement, QP members enacted their style in the process of sustaining a small, vibrant forum. For the celebrated "subcultures" of music fans and working-class schoolboys documented in Birmingham School ethnographic accounts,[27] style was by itself an incipient politics, an inchoate statement (from a Marxian telos) of class resentments. These working-class subcultures were not forums so much as cultural battering rams aimed at the larger society. Queer style, in contrast, was both a "ritual of resistance" to a heterosexist order and the lingua franca of a forum in which discussion itself mattered because it produced collective opinions as well as oppositional identities.

QP members spent quite a lot of their time together creating and communicating opinion as an end in itself. At one meeting, they collectively wrote new words for familiar Christmas carols they would sing as they went "queer carolling" amidst crowds of holiday shoppers. Ringing with witty irony, the lyrics they belted out bravura-style expressed a range of liberal-left political themes not necessarily related to sexual identity, including "Stop dreaming of a white Christmas – start thinking multiculturally," as well as references to equal pay for (women's) equal work, along with camp references to entertainer Ru Paul.

At QP weekly meetings members often talked in a free-flowing, informal way about news items, or upcoming events, as these examples from different meetings illustrate:

> Aaron said he was listening to NPR and heard a report that researchers had found pregnant women who took AZT had markedly lower chances of passing HIV on to their babies. Ray said that Robert Dornan [a conservative Republican congressman] was submitting a bid to run for President; faces crinkled into grimaces around the room.
>
> Aaron and Ray were talking about how Metro Gazette had just fired "all but three" of its reporters. Aaron recited a joke printed in an article in the paper: "If you had a gun with two bullets, and were in a room with Hitler, Mussolini, and an abortion doctor, what would you do? Answer: Shoot the abortion doctor twice." At that point Ray mentioned there would be a march and rally to commemorate the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision on abortion; people were supposed to bring a flower along. They talked about going as a group in QP teeshirts.
> Ray: "I don't have one."
> Brian, in a split-second reply: "Just go as you are, you look queer enough anyway!"
>
> Steve announced the news about Greg Louganis having AIDS. The news had broken that day. He and the others castigated reports that said Louganis had "known he had HIV" when he got blood in the swimming pool at the 1988 Olympics. Soneone else suggested they boycott commercial sponsors of these news reports. Everyone looked disgusted with the way the media covered the AIDS story.

QP meetings were a place for queers to mull over the news of the day. Unremarkable as that may seem for a group of activists, it is by no means given that all activist groups make freewheeling talk about news of the day a part of their meeting routine. Some such groups lack enough sense of public togetherness to let their talking venture beyond a narrowly defined agenda of tasks to carry out; in others, members

assume that the most important communication about current affairs always comes from a leader.[28]

So QP was a public forum, not simply a club of friends who gave themselves a group name. QP understood itself as acting in the public eye; at meetings, members would report the coverage local lgbt newspapers gave them for their protests or their participation in coalition work. In that spirit they welcomed a researcher, in a way that a private club of lgbt people might not. When I asked members' permission to study QP, one member concluded, "We're up for grabs." "Journalists come by all the time [to write about us]," remarked another. No one contested this characterization of QP. At meetings, people would be asked to "start from the beginning" when describing an event, even if most people in the room were already familiar with the details and had attended the event themselves. Conversation at meetings rarely touched on members' private lives – their jobs, their loves – except in quick jest. Members caught up on each others' private lives after meetings were declared over.

QP sponsored two events, outside of regular meetings, for talking about public issues during this study. Named "cafes," these evening events combined entertainment, educational presentations, and individual speak-outs before a microphone; these events say much about the forum QP sustained. QP advertised them in lgbt media and at local colleges, condidering them open to anyone who heard about them. Standing at the speak-out microphone, Brian introduced the first cafe as an effort to keep people talking to one another in the wake of the Republican sweep of the 1994 elections:

> Brian: "I have felt lonely and alienated, I think there are a lot of people like me.... I didn't vote in the last election; I didn't like the two parties, then, 'am I into a third party?' ... I think there are other people like me, I just [thought] we should talk, come up with new ideas and get the energy going again...."

Other impromptu statements followed Brian's; most packed caustic references to racism, sexism, homophobia, or poverty, either in straightforward exhortation, poetry, or song. Anna took a turn, announcing that "not voting was not a problem" but "ignorant people making choices between slogans" was. Touring a dismal political landscape, she observed that California's Proposition 187 (promoting "English only") had passed by a wide margin, and then invoked the dystopic scenario of Los Angeles in *City of Quartz*, one she feared would repeat itself in

their own locale hundreds of miles away. Will made a pitch for a gay voter's league, and for electoral involvement in general, warning that people "should not be fighting against people who are for gay rights even if they have a stupid way of going about it." Rita implored people to continue boycotting Coors beer or to start if they hadn't already. A woman who did not go to QP meetings expressed her anger at the lack of lgbt elected officials, and said she "cried when I found out that the [anti-gay] initiatives in Oregon and Idaho failed.... I get emotional when someone says it's OK for me to exist." Behind the cafe tables were clipboards offering cafe-goers opportunities to get publicly involved, by signing up for workshops on political skills, "sexism in the queer community," or using the Internet.

The walk-up microphone, the invitation to get more involved, a newspaper clipping-covered "wall of shame" that Allen had assembed opposite the stage, all bespoke QP's interest in constructing and debating opinion – and not only about obviously lgbt issues. Public, political talk mattered. QP also planned weekend workshops devoted to making talk more democratic in QP meetings, more amenable to women's equal participation. Two QP women thought up the workshops in part as a response to their frustrations with male speaking styles in QP. QP women and men both described these workshops as benefitting QP men, and also any lgbt people who might otherwise shy away from political groups.

In contrast with the aforementioned criticism that identity politics tends toward narrowness, QP produced relatively little pressure to enunciate a "correct," particularistic queer line. The disparate opinions about electoral politics at the cafe, just illustrated, are one case in point. QP members did agree on a number of political stances, enough so that they could initiate and become core participants in NARA, protest municipal policies, and lend group support and volunteer hours to a city council candidate – though only after several discussions. The point is that QP sponsored a space for critical discussion of some diversity of opinions, and one participant might occasionally question another's:

> Christopher related the tale of how the new Triangle Pride Committee, frequently scorned as "rich, white gays" in QP, had gotten discretionary funds from a state senator so that it could put on a parade. Meanwhile, an older, more grassroots parade-organizing group floundered for lack of funds and powerful connections. George questioned the oppositionalism in Christopher's story, saying that if Triangle got money then maybe that meant they were

> good at "making connections" and that the older group should get better at it. Christopher, QP's most outspoken foe of Triangle Pride readily agreed, although, he continued to think Triangle's mode of operation wasn't "right."

Participants were aware of, and willing to satirize, the cycle of dissipation that engulfs activists who find ever finer gradations of identity to deconstruct. During the discussion of women-only sexism workshops, one participant related a cautionary tale that everyone appreciated:

> Marjorie said that a Queer Nation group she had been in sponsored presentations about "gays and Hollywood," but kept showing films with all male casts. Finally, women at one of the showings stormed to the front of the theatre and said, "Stop! We're going to walk out if you don't include us in the discussion." The trouble was, Marjorie related, that people speaking from other identities got up to express their grievances too, including drag queens, people with AIDS, and others who decided their identity had been left out. Nora criticized the fragmentation in this scenario too, satirizing a forum in which "lesbians get their five minutes, and then gay men [get theirs] … as if I'm not related to what happens to gay men."

Reference points for queer social identity

For QP members, being queer meant sustaining a self-critical, radically democratic sensibility: Queer meant affirming diverse identities, and economic egalitarianism, and upholding participatory democracy, though QP members did not talk quite so abstractly about their views. QP members upheld queer identity in relation to local leaders, often "rich, white gay" leaders, that members never tired of criticizing for claiming to speak for all lgbt people.

Local lgbt powerbrokers raised QP's ire not on account of a disdain for power itself so much as because the powerbrokers represented a way of carrying sexual identity that was both less "out" and less concerned with democratic participation than QP.

> At the cafe event, I remarked to Morley that it seemed like everyone was really down on *Gay Report* [an lgbt weekly newspaper]. Al Fine [a *Gay Report* executive] had already been denounced at least once this evening at the microphone. Morley agreed and told me that Fine was a "powerbroker of the gay community." Fine's Triangle Pride Committee had supplanted the earlier, more grassroots group organizing pride parades in town. Ads for the parade that Fine's group was organizing didn't use words like "queer," or even "gay" except in a tiny caption.

At the cafe event another QP member said that "there are dinosaurs" that have been "running the gay community for twenty or thirty years" who resented grassroots efforts "not under their control." This QP member identified one of the dinosaurs as Al Fine. Or as Christopher put it at one QP meeting: "It's not Howard [another leader of Triangle Pride Committee] … it's the way decisions got made." In a similar vein, QP members joked that a lesbian Log Cabin (Republican) Club member and candidate for city council was not "queer," and that she called herself "gay" (not lesbian). At the post-election cafe event, Aaron criticized the Log Cabin women for distancing herself from grassroots groups like QP and ACT-UP:

> "We have a pluralistic vision of our community … we invited the Log Cabin [Republican] club…" but this woman is "not part of the queer community, she can go in the homosexual community."

"Homosexual" was indeed a negative reference point for QP: It meant privatized, insensitive to power differences within the lgbt community, unattuned to diversity – thus, *not* queer: Aaron, Michael, and other QP members frequently satirized a local bar whose advertisements invoked "the homosexual man," and whose patrons they regarded as high-status, white, gay men who cared little about progressive lgbt politics. NARA and QP men derided the bar for trying to intimidate people of color and women by the way that bouncers checked patrons' identifications at the door.

To identify as queer, in summary, was to place oneself in ambivalent and sometimes antagonistic relation to leaders who claimed to speak for a unitary gay community. Queers would relate multivalently to lgbt claims, and be willing to criticize them from the standpoint of other identities. They would be willing to criticize members of non-majority groups who acted undemocratically too: Steve contrasted QP with an lgbt advocacy group that he, QP, and non-QP participants in NARA too, perceived as the mouthpiece of a woman whose gender did not absolve her of the charge of being undemocratic. A queer community would not take a gay interest for granted, as QP thought that Al Fine did, but would insist on an open forum in which diverse *queers* could talk out diverse interests, discover commonalities, and respect differences that may be more or less salient in different situations. "Queer community" was both a descriptive and a normative designation: It located QP and its supporters within the larger lgbt milieu, and it also projected a hoped-for, lgbt-sponsored public arena that would

empower socially diverse queer voices. Fraser aptly addresses this dualism in people's own conceptions of themselves as a public: "However limited a public might be in its empirical manifestation at any given time, its members understand themselves as a potentially wider public."[29]

While holding out the vision of a queer, not just gay or lgbt community, QP wanted to remain critically engaged with people identified with "the gay community," as well as with non-lgbt opponents of social conservatives as we will see below. When discussing an alternative to the Triangle Pride Committee, for instance, QP members' civic-spiritedness amidst lgbt people overcame the temptation to disrupt it:

> Brian: "My gut reaction was "let's wreck [Triangle Pride], but...."
>
> Christopher also liked the idea of doing something to tarnish Triangle's parade. But someone else said that they should plan something "positive" instead of something "negative." Ray spoke up for this, saying that "we should do something that's 'nice' that wouldn't divide people."
>
> Christopher: "Good point."
>
> Morley: "We should not fragment the community into smaller pieces than it is already."
>
> Brian: "We should do something we think would be nice to do anyway." This seemed to be the consensus, then, and no other suggestions got taken up.

QP members did not simply eschew established communities, then, nor practice oppositionalism for its own sake. They distanced themselves from what they considered dogmatism in two other grassroots groups, including one with "queer" in its name that had disbanded before QP got initiated. Rita remarked that a reporter for one of the lgbt weeklies was surprised that she had not been more "in-your-face" when he asked her if she could support a gay Republican for office. She mused, "They think QP is still, like, 'fuck you!!' " – as some other "queer" groups have been. Neither did QP intend "queer" in academic queer theory's sense of deconstructing sexual and gender binary divisions.[30] By welcoming "people of all sexual persuasions" who wanted to fight homophobia, QP at least imagined that heterosexuals might join them in a queer identity. But they never discussed sexuality itself as a shifting construction. The actions that QP had undertaken or was planning to undertake – protesting municipal policy on same-sex partners, supporting political candidates who would reverse city policy, engaging in "visibility" actions

conceived as supportive messages to lgbt youth in suburbs – all assumed a constituency that defined itself in terms of a stable sexual identity over time. Some QP members were familiar with postmodern theory, and they satirized deconstructionist as well as cultural feminist jargon when they joked about whether to celebrate lesbian "history," "herstory," or "her/story." But the group had a consistent form of togetherness over time that the terms of queer theory by themselves don't illuminate. QP did not expose itself to the risk of dissipation that might threaten groups bent on deconstructing all identities, including their own.[31]

Solidarity in a queer forum

Poised in ambivalent relation to mainstream lgbt institutions and leaders, QP participants would have to enact a form of togetherness that did not depend solely on affiliation with uncritically received notions of a lgbt community. They enacted a personalized form of togetherness; members related to one another on the basis of individual authenticity as well as on a shared sense of lgbt membership. In other words, they could listen to one another seriously, create ties, on the principle that *individuals* are each valuable sources of political efficacy, rather than solely a principle of shared allegiance to the gay or lgbt establishment. Togetherness depended on individual expressiveness. QP members valued individually distinct contributions to the collective.

Personalized solidarity is not a contradiction in terms, as other research has shown at length,[32] personalized politics in QP did not give participants a license for selfish expressions of individuality. A personalized form of togetherness can help people carry on critical discussion that might threaten solidarity in a group whose unity depends more on affirming a single, communal identity. QP clearly entertained critical perspectives that would have offended people more univalently identified with "the gay commmunity" or "the lgbt community." At the same time, QP could coax a member into a common will if it was "for the greater good" as Aaron put it. For instance, at one meeting Tom became very upset that a QP-sponsored workshop on sexist communication styles would be open to women only. But his complaints did not tug the group into the descending spiral of fragmentation that some critics fear inevitably hits groups that indulge expressions of identity.

> Tom: “I’m hurt that I can’t go to a QP event.... I’m hurt that I’m perceived as a *man* (emphasis his) – I’m totally depersonalized.”
>
> People took Tom’s comments seriously and they opened up a discussion about the women-only session. Men supported the plan:
>
> Brian: “People are oppressed for a reason.” He went on to say that if women needed a “safe space” to talk about their grievances, then QP and men should support them.
>
> Aaron said it was “brave of Tom to share that feeling.” He had felt it too, but in this case people had to “put aside their personal feelings” for the sake of the “greater good.”
>
> Morley (sympathetically): “When I was in my first anarchist group, I felt the same way... I wanted to live in utopia where everyone is [equal], and all that good stuff. But we don’t, and you have to deal with it.”
>
> Michael agreed with Brian about a safe space; without them, he said, some oppressions would never get articulated for others to learn.
>
> Tom now requested that the conversation move on; he didn’t want to spend that much time on his feelings.

QP affirmed the voices of queer individuals in the context of collective projects. One of the best summary statements of this personalized kind of togetherness came in an appreciative note that Brian wrote and read aloud to the group after the first cafe event.

> Brian’s statement began by asking about the cafe event rhetorically, “Was it too white male, too gay ghetto...? These are questions we should discuss. He went on to describe the cafe set-up, “the computer and the dart board and the wall of shame ... all showed our individuality. It [the cafe event] was a rousing success for process.” He described how a reporter from an lgbt paper had asked him, “who’s in charge of this” and he was happy to say, “no one really” and was proud that it was true. We want a society, he said, in which people “are not competitive” and there is “self-determination” and people “share the things they need.” His note closed with the observation that “I really like working with you all.”

The invitation to self-critical discussion, the paean to individuality, the ideal of self-determining group members, all aptly characterize the way QP sustained its queer forum. To be queer was to be an empowered individual who articulated a highly personalized contribution to the queer public good. It did not mean sounding off individually at will for the sake of ego.

From personalized to community interest politics: Queer to gay

Intergroup politics means action, not talk

QP participants were not entirely satisfied with QP. In interviews, a majority of the core QP members shared the same frustration, in similar words: QP needed to reach out more, beyond the relatively small number of people willing to identify as queer. And it needed to practice more "politics." The balance of QP's projects had shifted too much toward what participants called "social" or "service" projects – putting on the cafes, for instance. Members clearly valued free-flowing talk, but they didn't value it as fully "political." In meetings, QP members talked about a range of different activities as "political," and these included visibility actions that would announce queer identity – as in queer carolling, and pressure campaigns against either lgbt or straight people or institutions, as well as electoral activism. In interviews, both the most electorally-oriented QP participant and the most anti-electoral participant, and most in between, agreed that it was "political" to enunciate queer identity in a public setting and it was "political" to engage in activism with a more conventional interest-group orientation. But most QP participants thought that enacting politics beyond QP's own visibility politics, reaching out to a broader array of lgbt people or straight people, meant fighting for group interests, and it meant "action," conceived as separate from talk.

In a QP meeting, for instance, members stumbled over various definitions of "politics" but came to rest on the assumption that politics is "doing." Allen put "political activity" on the agenda, commenting that "it would be nice if we did that for a change." Aaron agreed. Morley objected to referring to QP's current activities as "not political." Facilitator Brian amended that what the agenda item really meant was "strategy and tactics." Someone else said it meant "electoral politics." Trying to find common ground, Brian now said it meant dealing with "specific issues," and he referred to QP's founding statement, saying "do we want to do direct action, do we want to do more outreach, or? I want to do everything [but we can't]." The group settled on "visibility" actions as a next possible project. They agreed that queers were most visible "in the city," and less so in "the suburbs." Aaron and Ray suggested stringing up banners over downtown streets with slogans castigating a city council candidate. Whether producing "direct action" visibility hits or entering the electoral process, politics meant a kind of "doing" – pressuring, confronting – counterposed to "just talk."

In an ethos that understood doing apart from talk, and devalued reflective identity talk within "politics," it became easy to take the notion of a unified community interest for granted. We see here that NARA activists, including QP participants, did not let themselves critique the notion of a unified gay interest *and* create multicultural alliances against right-wing initiatives *at the same time*. This would have required talk about identity: NARA participants would have to discuss who NARA could be other than self-appointed spokespersons for the readily available "gay community" identity. But both QP and NARA participants assumed that fighting the right called for strategic action, not talk. This was all the more the case since – as QP participants tended to say in interviews – it should be obvious that lgbt people in general had a strong interest in opposing the right. QP members had not just been seized suddenly by narrowly gay self-interest: Almost all the core members of QP said in interviews that they wanted to pursue more than specifically queer-related issues in their activism. They insisted queer issues, racism, and sexism were all connected. And strikingly, none said that "feeling supported" for being lesbian or gay was an important reason for being in QP. But the definitions of politics operating in QP prompted a switch in the routine mode of activism from personalized politics to a community-interest politics dedicated to "action."

Social identity and solidarity in NARA's community of interest

NARA's organizational format resembled QP's in its consensus decision-making, its use of a rotating facilitator, its openness to individual initiative, and its avoidance of formal leadership roles. Also reminiscent of QP was NARA's broad vision statement:

> The [NARA] connects individuals and representatives of organizations working to promote social and economic justice, democracy, and sexual and reproductive freedom by stopping/counteracting the political and religious right's attempts to suppress freedoms, to undermine the separation of church and state, and to impose religious control of government, education and public life.

Notably the statement makes no special mention of lgbt identities or interests; QP's in contrast named "queers" as the beneficiaries of its actions. Activists present at the earliest planning sessions for NARA concurred in interviews that they wanted an organization that would reach out to non-lgbt groups. Yet during this study, NARA remained a

very largely lgbt organization that, like QP, spoke mainly to other lgbt people.

Even with the organizational similarities to QP, a different kind of social identity, and correspondingly different form of group solidarity, were already evident in NARA's earliest public meetings. Meetings sported little if any of QP's "queer" style. And the few times participants used the word "queer" they mostly meant it as an abbreviation for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered," not as a reference to a radically democratic politics. Rather than posit themselves as radicalized individuals within the lgbt milieu, trying to promote a new, egalitarian queer community, participants in NARA identified themselves as members of a generic lgbt or gay community. NARA defined its lgbt community identity in relation to the reference point of "the right" or "the Christian right," slotting itself in a bipolar political world. Solidarity in NARA meant instrumental, "network" ties with potential group affiliates of NARA who could also situate themselves in this bi-polar field of identity. From NARA's very beginning as a public group, strategic talk about the community interest was valued over multivalent identity talk, even though NARA's participatory organizational form made such discussion possible in theory. One could hardly deny the premise that many right-wing groups constituted an adversary for most lgbt people. NARA's strategizing against them was certainly reasonable. The point is that there could be more than one way for lgbt people to identify themselves and their reference points. Community interest within a bipolar world was not always the most strategic way.

When talking about what exactly NARA would do, members returned repeatedly to images of instrumental relations between lgbt groups with similar, presumably obvious interests that simply needed to be acted upon, and did not require much multivalent identity talk. At the first meeting of the working group on schools and youth, one of the most active working groups in NARA, the facilitator suggested that NARA could strengthen "connections" between existing groups rather than starting new ones. No one disagreed. The facilitator decided this group's "assignment" for the next meeting would be to come with names of two organizations that they could "do coalition-building" with. At the next meeting, members discussed the group's "mission," and a new facilitator summarized that "we take support of queer rights as given," and that they might want to "build a coalition" with people who "support gay rights but actually are working on other issues," such

as welfare rights. It is interesting that "queer" and "gay" here are interchangeable. The facilitator characterized the group as a "tool for networking." Trying to energize people in the room, the facilitator asked them to enunciate their "personal visions" of the group's mission.

> Manny: "I don't know, except that we want to network (smiling sheepishly) … the Christian Right has the *700 Club*, and short of a television station …."
>
> Lane: "I think we should have a network in place," (pausing) and he continued that it would be nice if the network could produce a "rapid response" to late-breaking events.
>
> Jordy said that it would be good to educate groups like PTAs about multicultural issues, and Manny added,
>
> "Give people a panoramic view of what the right is trying to do, which is divide and conquer."

The network, the facilitator summed up several times, would serve right-fighters who wanted to "tap into resources." A "network" would not be the locus of a new, melded identity like that of "queer," an identity that activists might wear along with narrower ones. Rather, a network would be a "tool," a set of "resources" for fixed identities and pre-constituted interests – such as lgbt interests – assumed to exist already elsewhere.

NARA's way of situating itself may have made inter-group relations efficient, though we show below that well-meaning coalition-builders could also trip over unspoken differences. But community-interest politics also gave NARA members a difficult basis for talking through identities critically. QP could take a multivalent approach to lgbt identity because QP rejected the notion of a simple bipolar arena, though it very much wanted to fight the right. Critical, multivalent talk about identity would not harm solidarity in QP as it might in a group such as NARA, whose solidarity depended on a unitary interest posed against an undifferentiated adversary.

Missing interests, shrinking critique: The gay community interest

QP had considered NARA its prime effort for broadening the cultural and class constituency of QP's small, actually existing queer community. QP members never said that NARA should have interests separate

from those of QP. But the gay or lgbt community interest that NARA posited was a shrunken version of QP's more multivalent queer interest. At NARA's first coordinating council meeting, for instance, members argued over whether to make recent changes in welfare policy a NARA issue. Anna argued that NARA should contact other gay organizations and tell them to get involved in welfare rights. "There are poor gays too!" she observed. Will joined the conversation, saying he disagreed with the whole thrust of the discussion:

> Somewhat bemused, Will announced that "we are kidding ourselves" for thinking that the group would be able to interest other gay organizations in the issue of welfare. "We need to explain why this is important to gays and lesbians" – he repeated this several times. "[They] think welfare is about black women with kids … if we say it's about poor people it's going nowhere in our community." He went on to advocate for a "position paper" that "explains why this matters to the gay community." Anna repeated her observation that there are poor gays and lesbian mothers.

Will's comments implied that members of "the gay community" would not care about people not typically perceived as part of the gay community, while Anna's comment implied that members of the community just needed to be reminded that some community members were indeed poor or caring for children. Both Will and Anna implied that there was an unambiguous "gay interest" that people either did or should carry as members of "the gay community." Both assumed that lgbt people would care about welfare only as lgbt people with lgbt interests. Will's image of the gay community carried the discussion.

A welfare-rights working group, including at least one QP member, resulted from this discussion, and it continued to assume the role of alerting lgbt-identified people to their "real," unambiguous, community interest. Ed, currently active in QP as well as NARA, said his welfare-rights working group was writing a flyer on "why gays should care about welfare." He said it "would say things that concern gay and lesbian middle-class people, or things we think concern them." Welfare needed to be presented as a properly "gay" issue, not one that appealed to people on the basis of other identities or interests. Welfare would matter to lgbt people when it mattered as an lgbt issue.

In other NARA settings, participants squeezed out talk that would complicate the notion of unambiguous gay community interest. NARA's Triangle Voter Working Group began a voter registration campaign characterized by an organizer as an effort to "get out the vote in the

gay and lesbian community, and in the progressive community," and oust an incumbent perceived as agreeing with social-issues conservatives. A QP representative at the meeting asked how the incumbent's challenger, favored by Triangle, stood on issues. Another QP member who was working for the challenger's campaign rattled off an answer, as if providing technical and unnecessary information: "She's for domestic partners, she's for literacy programs, wants to clean up public housing." She added the woman was not clear on how to go about these things but seemed sincere about them. Others at the meeting followed with their own questions that indicated they did not simply vote an unambiguous "gay interest." When asked what to tell gays about why to vote for the woman, a man from a gay Catholic group retorted, "Pro-gay and domestic partners will be enough for most people." Yet, a woman active in lgbt civic life said "Domestic partners is important but there are issues bigger than that [on the ballot]," and gave as an example that she did not want public schools like the one her daughter attended to be financed by gambling. Another woman at the meeting asked for more of the woman candidate's stances on issues too, and "not just gay and lesbian issues"; she proposed creating a "fact sheet." A NARA organizer, satirizing the presumably weak civic skills of the "average gay voter," said the group should go ahead and create a fact sheet with "lots of white space, bullets, point-counterpoint."

It is possible, of course, that NARA participants really wanted NARA to focus only on a "gay community" interest from the start, even if many also pursued a politics more critical of a unified gay interest, in QP. But field evidence indicates that NARA participants – including those that did *not* participate in QP – did continue to care about issues besides those immediately identifiable as "gay" in their fight against the right. If these activists passed up or suppressed opportunities to talk about these issues and their relation to lgbt people *in NARA settings*, it is not because these issues were unimportant to them. NARA's schools and youth working group had a brainstorming session in one of its early meetings, to decide how the group perceived its targets on the right. The session included a current QP member and a former one who continued to respect QP. Viewing the session in some detail reveals remarkably that NARA participants did care about a broad range of issues beyond specifically lgbt-related ones:

Lisa facilitated a "mind-mapping" exercise, asking everyone to call out issues they associated with the theme of the "right's agenda for schools and youth." A hub with spokes took shape on poster paper as Lisa

drew lines out from the theme printed in the middle and labelled them with the issues people raised. Sub-spokes got drawn in for more specific items subordinate to a main issue. People started by calling out unambiguously lgbt-related issues, but quickly branched out to broader concerns. Lisa now asked each in the group to draw a star by each of the five issues that most concerned him or her personally. The diagram as a whole would map "our common concerns and the distribution of our energy" as this meeting's official minutes put it. The diagram would guide the group's foray into anti-right organizing. Of the twelve main issues, the one with the most stars (8) was "attacks on critical thinking programs"; two of those stars went to a sub-spoke representing purported right-wing attempts to abolish "drug prevention or conflict resolution" programs in schools. The next most stars went to the spoke representing "English Only" initiatives such as California's Proposition 187, and the spoke for a theme "youth as property" initially raised by someone concerned with authoritarian treatments of kids by police, schools, or parents; both spokes received five stars. Next in level of concern was "destruction of public schools," which earned four stars from the group. Near the bottom of the group's roster of concern was the issue with the clearest relation to lgbt school-age youth: "stopping sex education." This item was tied for second to last place (one star) with four other items – "taxpayer groups," "school boards and stealth candidates," and "exploitation of youth by business."

While most of the members of this group had identified themselves as representing a local lgbt organization to NARA, and all identified as lgbt persons, the group as a whole carried a broad range of concerns about the political right in which those most obviously connected to lgbt people were not the most salient. Of course group members may well have interpreted "critical thinking programs" as important for creating an accepting atmosphere for sexual or cultural difference. But the point here, made all the more clearly by the group's interest in English-Only initiatives, is that these NARA members themselves did not carry into their anti-right efforts a narrowly constructed gay interest of the sort they projected onto their imagined constituency, "the gay community," seen in examples above.

The strategic limits of community interest talk

NARA members passed up opportunities to discuss multiple interests and identities they themselves carried, even when doing so might have

been strategically useful as well as more public-spirited and inclusive. To illustrate, I closely follow scenes here from a publicly advertised NARA workshop on lgbt youth and the right. Organizers intended the workshop to be interactive; calling the workshop a "forum" in fact, they took care in setting aside periods for the audience to break into small groups to discuss the issues that speakers raised, to develop opinions about lgbt youths' experiences, and feed those opinions into plans for movement-building. The goal was to combine strategizing and mutual learning and opinion-forming. Yet some topics seemed beyond the pale of discussion.

Throughout the workshop, keynote speakers and participants identified their interests as broader than narrowly lgbt ones, but at the same time spoke as if there *was* an obvious lgbt interest, and an identity to go with it, that did not require discussion. A core NARA member, for instance, lamented in her talk that the right was "dismantling public education. It's not just about attacking lesbians and gays, it's about public education." She recited a string of statistics revealing a widening gap in educational opportunity, saying the right-wing agenda would only accelerate the growth of inequality. She paused, as if catching herself, and assured the group "I'm coming back around to gay and lesbian education," in case her talk seemed to be getting off the track. Clearly she cared about more than specifically lgbt issues alone. She observed that "gays and lesbians are being used as a wedge issue.... 'English Only' [campaigns had] the same goal ten years ago." She ended with the statement, "We need to reclaim family values – that's the end of my own bias." This was her first, and last, specific statement about what lgbt people should do and how they should represent themselves – as rightful claimants to the mantle of family values. But she treated this statement of her "bias" as an intrusion, a forgiveable rallying cry to end a speech perhaps, not as an invitation to discuss who lgbt people are and what their interests might be in relation to the political right.

In a cheerleading tone, the keynote speaker from a national lgbt organization emphasized electoral arenas that she thought lgbt people had ignored. During a small group "break-out" period, I asked the man sitting next to me, a regular QP participant, why *he* thought lgbt people had not gotten more involved in electoral politics; the answer was illuminating: He said that "gays avoided the school board" because they did not want to get tagged with the old canard of "recruiting children." His answer suggested that a lgbt interest in gaining school

board seats could not be completely unambiguous, while the thrust of the national leader's comments was that this strategy was self-evidently proper: "How many of us are running for office?" she chided, as if goading people on to do what they already know is right. QP, in contrast, had hosted divergent opinions on the value of electoral politics. But during general discussion periods at this forum, the QP participants in attendance, including the man next to me, said nothing about the thrust of the forum, even though they were perfectly capable of being outspoken in other contexts.

In all, the forum treated lgbt interests as obvious, and elicited solidarity against the right over critical discussion. With tears in her eyes, a speaker described injustices that lgbt youth suffered. She recounted that a bill considered by the U.S. Senate would make it illegal for school counselors to affirm lgbt students. She pictured a scenario in which a desperate sexual minority youth seeks a counselor's advice: "'I'm getting beat up every day.... I want to kill myself.' Well, the counselor cannot say 'you're OK!'" In this very moving instance, it would be especially difficult to challenge the obviousness of an lgbt interest. The problem is that this representation of an aggrieved gay community left little room for exploring divergent, conflicting identities that lgbt people sometimes might have to negotiate as they defined the needs of lgbt youth, or adults for that matter. Speakers' comments tugged at the audience to *identify* actively with sexual minority people, not to *talk through diverse identifications*.

A diversity of identifications, so salient in QP forums, seemed missing at this NARA forum. When I raised the issue of identity itself, in another small group discussion, it failed to catch on:

> When it was my turn to speak, I said I would like to see more opportunities for lgbt groups and straight groups to work together [in fighting the right]. I said I didn't know of other alliances like that.
>
> Facilitator: "Do you know about the Interfaith Alliance? There are 1000s of churches."
>
> PL: "If it's the one I'm thinking of, they're pretty 'don't touch' on sexual minority issues."
>
> Facilitator: "They haven't dealt with them yet, but there are a lot of queer people involved in it."

The facilitator saw no difference between a group in which there happen to be queer people and a group that makes a point of speaking to issues from both queer and straight positions. So like others at the forum, the facilitator saw the goal as speaking *for* the (obvious) interests of lgbt people, without asking from which identity positions a group might speak.

As NARA's main African-American participant reminded the assembly, though, those identity positions mattered politically; there was not such an obvious, single "gay community" interest for which to speak. In concluding comments, Chester displayed mounting irritation:

> "All we have in common is that we like to have sex with the same kind of people. That's it – otherwise we're different." Chester went on to say he didn't want "the gay community" to be stereotyped as all the same. "The Christian Right does that.... straights aren't all the same, neither are we." He proposed that there should be "more alliance-building between gays and lesbians, and between African-American gays and lesbians and whites."

Chester was criticizing what the forum had already taken for granted: that assumption that there were unproblematic lgbt interests simply requiring instrumental action, not discussion or identity-creation. Coming as they did at the end of the workshop, Chester's comments could only sound like a variation on the calls for "more networking" that were reverberating in the room, or else like particularistic and troublesome dissent that would break group solidarity, rather than a call for people to talk more about who, collectively, they were. No one took up Chester's challenge to re-think the terms of community interest.

In summary, NARA members articulated diverse interests apart from their immediate lgbt relevance, just as had QP members. But in the context of NARA meetings and forums, diverse interests got simplified into ones that could be taken as obviously pro-lgbt and anti-right. The multivalent stance toward identity that QP raised in its "queer" identity claim largely dropped out of discussion, replaced by the assumption that all present, including people who might happen to be straight, would create solidarity around a univalent, sexual minority identity. This might be less remarkable, though still interesting, if NARA were a long-term survivor of battles between groups that could only agree on a narrow strip of lgbt common ground. But NARA was very much inventing itself during this study, and yet was involved mainly with specifically lgbt issues – contrary to the vision of its founders.

One might wonder whether QP members were simply not very active in their own creation, NARA. But over half of core QP members during this study were active in it. The woman widely considered the (unofficial) leader and unifying force in NARA called herself "queer" in an interview and said she identified strongly with QP, though she did not go to its meetings. QP members prided themselves on being outspoken and did not shrink from making good on their reputation at lgbt events. While a few did criticize NARA in interviews for failing to have become a multiracial group that produced strong cross-racial alliances, and failing to broaden out beyond specifically lgbt issues, none of these remarked on the lack of critical identity talk in NARA. And QP members who reported on NARA at QP meetings transmitted the themes of "networking" and community interest without further comment. QP member Christopher reported that a working group had "basically decided that coalition-building was the thing to do" and "there shouldn't be any question but that QP supports – well … that coalition-building is one of our goals." Others agreed. Christopher spoke now in an oddly bureaucratic register: "Our organizational data base is weak though our personal data base is strong." Coalition-building, in other words, was as interest-driven task that called for effective administration, not discussion. Reporting to QP about NARA's welfare rights group and describing a welfare rights rally in which NARA would participate, QP member Ed remarked that "most gays, lesbians and bisexuals think they're not going to be affected by this," but "the cuts are much broader than what people call 'welfare.'" Here again was the assumption that lgbt people would care about welfare cuts only if they thought these affected them as lgbt people. Like their NARA compatriots, they assumed that reaching out to practice intergroup politics meant "action," or "strategy and tactics" as Brian had put it at a QP meeting, in pursuit of interests that were obvious.

Alternative interpretations

Several accounts not already considered are plausible alternatives to my argument about cultural structure, and the meanings of politics and action on which those structures pivot. One account would hold that each group attracted different kinds of individuals, the very significant overlap notwithstanding, and these individuals carried differing political orientations that turned the two groups in different directions. Some proponents of "new social movement" theory might argue that QP activists, like other recent cultural innovators, defined themselves

more in terms of values such as self-discovery and cultural change than the material or more traditional "political" rights issues associated with left or "progressive" movements.[33] Interview questions tapped this possibility: I asked QP and NARA participants whether they considered themselves "left," and if so, what that meant. There was remarkable uniformity across the two groups. All said they would consider themselves "left" or "progressive" (none refused the designation "left") if these meant supporting rights and opportunities for racial minorities, poor people, and sexual minorities. None identified as Marxists or as followers of left parties; only one identified himself explicitly with "the labor movement." Many said in varied ways, rarely with a lot of ideological elaboration, that queers, blacks, welfare, and AIDS were "connected" since, in the words of one QP woman, they are "all screwed over by the same powers-that-be kind of thing." Two members of NARA were avid practitioners of a traditional community-organizing style that set them somewhat apart from other NARA members and from QP. But these two said they both appreciated groups styled "like ACT-UP" – highly participatory and convention-busting like QP – and both had belonged to an ACT-UP chapter in another city; when they moved, they said, they decided their new lgbt community needed a different kind of activism. But there was no reason the pre-existing political orientation of either would naturally lead to a community-interest politics instead of some other kind. Both had in fact begun reading community-organizing literature only after moving. I learned that there was one very strong proponent of electoral politics in QP and two in NARA, and two people who completely eschewed electoral politics in NARA and one in QP. Both groups included people who had worked in lgbt social-service groups and people who had never done so. Political values or orientations by themselves, then, would make a difficult predictor of discursive style in QP and NARA.

Another account would offer that it made good organizational sense for NARA to limit open-ended, critical discussion, because informally structured, talk-intensive groups have more difficulties building coalitions with other groups.[34] An anti-right network would simply have different goals from a group like QP, and need different, more efficient kinds of discussion. This account might be especially appealing had NARA been born in the crucible of a concrete, clearly defined, already-existing struggle over specific issues. But NARA's goals were still evolving and crystallizing. NARA activists themselves said they were not sure of the best way to produce anti-right politics at the outset, and

knew no grassroots precedent for the alliance they hoped to achieve. We saw the youth and schools group stumbling awkwardly through a discussion of what exactly they wanted to do. Further, at the outset NARA opted for the same consensus decision-making style practiced in QP, one that participants characterized as “the ACT-UP model,” perhaps unaware of similarly organized anti-nuclear, peace, environmental, and new left groups before AIDS activism. NARA’s de facto leader explained to me at length how important consensus decision-making was to her. NARA participants seemed to want the space for highly participatory discussion, then, but *already* took for granted that “doing politics” meant using discussion only to produce networking or strategic self-presentation because these counted as producing “action” with other political groups. By themselves, the exigencies of fighting the right did not necessarily dictate a conventionally “efficient” style or a focus on one generic identity; the narrowing shift was cultural, not transparently logical. Strategic goals by themselves did not have to preclude spaces for critical, multivalent talk *amidst* the networking and strategizing talk that would be important too.

It is worth recalling, also, that QP prioritized “networking” in its mission statement; QP did not present itself as a support group or other “non-instrumental” entity. And NARA allowed room for individual initiative as did QP: The religious-affairs working-group coordinator joked at a meeting that anyone, like himself, who wanted to start another group under the NARA aegis could do so and receive NARA support. He used as an example another man who made a NARA project out of touring local churches to seek out pastors’ views on homosexuality. In short, differing organizational imperatives[35] by themselves are not enough to have caused differences in the tenor of discussion between QP and NARA settings.

Finally, we could ask whether NARA had difficulties fulfilling QP’s vision of a multicultural alliance because QP’s own radicalism and its ambivalence about mainstream lgbt leaders bestowed a difficult legacy on activists trying to reach out to identities less unconventional. Perhaps NARA clung to its generic community interest stance for lack of successful relations with diverse groups that could have helped articulate that stance with more nuance. In a related vein, we might wonder whether NARA’s QP founders and participants lacked a sufficient sense of community citizenship to appreciate more mainstream lgbt people like Al Fine whose own willingness to announce sexual identity cleared the way for QP’s identity politics. This account would miss,

though, that non-QP participants in NARA talked identity with at least as much of a community interest stance as did QP participants. What was striking is that QP members rarely contested that stance openly, nor the assumptions behind it about what "politics" is.

A deeper limitation in this account comes from the fact that QP members did carry a sense of obligation to lgbt people in their locale, whether of the "gay" or "queer" community: QP was willing to participate in one of the most "mainstream" lgbt events in town, the annual community awards competition sponsored by a company with a record for sexual discrimination and harsh employee relations. QP members characteristically made a public issue of the sponsor's labor and lgbt policies, but they also showed pride that QP had won a prize in the "best grassroots group" category in a previous competition, and that two individuals associated with QP were candidates for "best contribution by an individual to the community." And at least some of QP's core members also volunteered in lgbt service organizations and electoral organizations that had very little if any of QP's queer standpoint. One such member was Michael, who missed one QP meeting the night he was coordinating a workshop on safe sex for a public-service group. QP members wondered why he had missed the meeting.

> Aaron: "Is that his job or is he doing it for altruism?"
>
> Ray: "Well, he's on the board" (but did not *have* to be there).
>
> Aaron (conclusively): "It's altruism."

While QP members criticized some gay *leaders*, they were more tied in to the mainstream gay community than the radically unconventional "queer" designation might suggest. They did not simply oppose gay leaders for the sake of chic oppositionalism.

Rethinking identity politics and democracy

If democratic public life depends on encouraging "mutual engagement simultaneously across significant differences of identity and interest," as Calhoun recently argues,[36] then it requires people who can talk self-critically about their identities as they engage others. We need to hear them talking in the everyday settings of identity groups to assess the possibilities for this mutual engagement. The possibilities depend at least partly on the kinds of solidarity and social identity that together

structure identity talk. The scenarios here suggest that identity politics may become more narrow when people identify with a univalent community, or with an instrumental coalition of community interests, than when people identify in a more personalized, multivalent way, keeping several identities on their horizon. Multivalent identities may sound highly unconventional compared with the long history of community interest politics in the United States, and queer style in QP accentuated members' unconventionality. Yet this unconventionality neither destabilized QP as a group, nor deflected its members from a sense of obligation to larger lgbt or politically progressive causes. This is not to say that a stance toward identities like QP's always avoids fragmentation and shrill oppositionalism. The point is that multivalent identity talk can promote identification across groups. It can result in a kind of democratic, public virtue re-tooled for a world of multiple, self-consciously held identities. The kind of talk that the "forum" lens highlights matters not only for public-spirited citizenship, but it can also have directly strategic consequences in a multicultural polity whose members must sort out identity claims together.

The community interest and personalized styles have influenced more than sexual identity politics. There may be less difference between identity politics as defined in this study and contemporary forms of activism, such as environmentalism, than popularly assumed. The two cultural structures discussed here may have shaped a good deal of grassroots political discussion and activism since WWII.[37] That would mean that many grassroots movements face the dilemma of maintaining a critical, public-sprited forum in small, personalized spaces or else opting for greater clout and visibility but narrowed visions, especially if they define "politics" and "action" the way QP and NARA members did. Environmentalists, for instance, have sustained their most critically reflective discussion in small spaces with personalized discussion.[38]

This brings us to a central weakness of personalized identity politics, no matter how democratically intended: it remains somewhat marginalized. Did QP's critical talk matter if it got heard rarely in coalition-building settings, or other lgbt or progressive political circles? Did QP's talk-intensive focus doom it to the fate of innumerable other small protest and education groups whose critical talk lingers on the margins of political life?[39] We get a fresh perspective on this old dilemma of mainstreaming if we distinguish between critical, multivalent talk itself and the structured forums in which talk happens. In theory, we can imagine a political community that subtly combines

multivalent, critical identity talk with strategic, coalition-building talk. This community might produce a new identity less marginalizing or risky than the "queer" one, and more strategically sensitive to gay and progressive mainstreams. With such an identity, more people – including non-activists – might practice multicultural citizenship, and relate more multivalently to identities than NARA did with its community advocacy. The democratic vision introduced at the beginning holds out just such a possibility. Critical, multivalent identity talk does not *have* to marginalize the speaker, in other words; it does not have to be an indulgence that drains "real politics." The problem is that the cultural structures available for talking identity work together to marginalize multivalent talk, sequestering it in small spaces. Criticism that counterposes identity talk to political coalition-building ends up reproducing a political culture that already fragments identity politics into obscure talkers and vision-deprived doers.

Criticisms of identity politics also offer at least one crucial insight, if we reformulate the criticism for arenas in which many people acknowledge multiple, politicized identities: In a multicultural democracy, a hardening of identity is a degeneration of civility. I did find in identity politics some of the incivility that critics score, in NARA's devaluation of its own gay community for its presumed lack of civic virtue regarding non-lgbt issues. Multicultural citizenship requires a willingness to believe that when people are acting citizens, they care about, or should care about, the fates of diverse identity groups at the same time.

I have emphasized the potential in social movements for critical, forum-like discussion, and the limits on discussion. But if we recognize that those limits are culturally *structured* and work in tandem with cultural definitions of politics and action, then we cannot fault individuals in settings like NARA's or QP's for not challenging those limits more readily. Neither am I suggesting that strategic, unquestioned unity is always a bad thing. Community interest politics may limit the forum, but it remains an important kind of politics *among others*. The challenge of multicultural democracy, for both activists and engaged citizens, is to create political initiatives that are public-spirited and also effective for a variety of groups. If a group's vision of ties with other groups is limited solely to an additive solidarity between communities with pre-constituted interests,[40] then that group will fall short of the multicultural, democratic ideal, and may also suffer the blind-spots and contradictions illustrated here. Still, in the world that democratic theorists envision, there ought to be room for affirmations of single

identities. And "solidarity-building" in the conventional, activist's sense of the term should have its place; identity groups may well need a safe space[41] to talk in angry unison about, to cry about, injustices perpetrated on one's "own people," without fearing rebuke on grounds of being selfish. But that kind of togetherness is not enough: Where *can* critical identity talk happen if grassroots forums hang together only by exempting a communal "we" from critical scrutiny for the sake of participants' esprit de corps? Identities will not arrange themselves if people do not speak them, and grassroots forums are the prime place to do the talking. A multicultural democracy needs not only multiple forms of identity talk, but flexible forms of solidarity that sustain both unities and particularities.

Acknowledgments

I thank Robert Connell, John Delamater, Nina Eliasoph, Josh Gamson, Larry Gross, Michele Lamont, Pam Oliver, Jane Piliavin, Nora Cate Schaeffer, Steven Seidman, Mitchell Stevens, Rhys Williams, and the *Theory and Society* Editors for wonderfully helpful comments on paper drafts, presentations, and musings related to this project. I greatly appreciate QP and NARA group members for welcoming me as a researcher. An Annenberg Scholarship gave me the opportunity to explore ideas amidst engaging colleagues; I thank Elihu Katz, Nicola Evans, Lena Jayyusi, T. Dunbar Moodie, and the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania.

Notes

1. These "theorists of multicultural democracy" are sometimes called "radical democracy" theorists because they envision an indefinite expansion of democratic participation in social life, beyond the bounds of the liberal, modern state. Without denying conceptual differences between these perspectives, I want to emphasize their shared notion that identity groups ought to engage one another and co-evolve democratically through open-ended, critical conversation. Key statements of a multicultural democratic viewpoint include Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in Craig Calhoun, editor, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 109– 142; Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community," in Chantal Mouffe, editor, *Dimensions of Radical Democracy* (London: Verso, 1992), 225–239, and Chantal Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics," in *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), 74–89; Cornel West,

"The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in Simon During, editor, *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 203–217; and Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, "Introduction" in Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, editors, *Social Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–35. Shane Phelan uses a similar imagination when she envisions a lesbian-identified way of practicing citizenship, in "The Space of Justice: Lesbians and Democratic Politics" in Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, ibid., 332–356. See also Iris Young, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," in Nicholson and Seidman, ibid., 187–215. For relevant political commentaries on identity politics, see Jeffrey Escoffier, "The Limits of Multiculturalism," *Socialist Review* 21/3–4 (1991): 61–73; Lisa Tessman, "Beyond Communitarian Unity in the Politics of Identity," *Socialist Review* 24/1–2 (1995): 55–83.

2. "Identity politics" is a slippery term that I do not intend to have carry great analytical weight; the varied meanings and debates surrounding the term deserve a paper in themselves. My use of "identity politics" is loosely informed by Charles Taylor's notion of "the politics of recognition" in Amy Gutmann, editor, *Multiculturalism: Examining "the Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). I am using the term as a rough but widely accessible tag for social movements since the 1960s that seek public recognition or advocate rights for groups that identify by gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or religion. Thus, environmental, peace, and anti-nuclear movements – which often get grouped with contemporary feminism or lesbian/gay activism as "new social movements" – for the most part do not practice identity politics as defined here. I do not mean to imply that groups practicing identity politics necessarily take their group identities as essential sources of members' interests; that is an empirical question I address here. What matters most is how people talk about identity in everyday settings, not how we decide which settings definitely are sites of "identity politics."
3. "Critical" means a willingness to acknowledge and debate the assumptions behind one's own interests or identity claims, an avoidance of ideological taboos. See Jürgen Habermas's conception of critical discourse in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols., T. McCarthy, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987, 1984).
4. See William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
5. Cornel West ("The New Cultural Politics of Difference"), Nancy Fraser ("Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy"), and Chantal Mouffe ("Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community") make similar statements about this tension.
6. From here on I use the abbreviation "lgbt" to designate "sexual minority" when either I or the people I am quoting intend a generic, inclusive designation. I use other terms, such as "gay" and "queer," when the people quoted or referred to were using or clearly implying those terms.
7. All groups' and individuals' names are pseudonyms. Pseudonyms have preserved the cultural and political valence of the original names – so that "queer" and "right" in the pseudonyms carry over from the respective groups' real names.
8. The focus is on *talk* about sexual and other identities, rather than the putative origins of those identities. For an extensive review of the debates about whether sexual identity is innately determined or socially constructed, see Steven Epstein, "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism," *Socialist Review* 93/94 (1987): 9–54; Steven Seidman, "Identity and Politics in a Gay 'Postmodern' Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes," in Michael Warner,

editor, *Fear of a Queer Planet* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), 105–144; Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).

9. The war metaphor has received much attention through the work of James Hunter, especially his *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), Robert Hughes (*Culture of Complaint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993)), and Todd Gitlin (*The Twilight of Common Dreams* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995)). See also Martin Marty, *The One and the Many* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Cultural conservatives define their protagonists as upholders of a Western cultural heritage, and their most well-known arguments include Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), and Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991). Criticisms of identity politics from a left, universalist perspective favor the unifying force of the left's social justice tradition, and those arguments include Todd Gitlin's (*The Twilight of Common Dreams*) and Barbara Epstein's ("'Political Correctness' and Collective Powerlessness," *Socialist Review* 21/3–4 (1991): 13–35).
10. For critical reviews of the culture wars debate and some empirical investigations, see Rhys Williams, editor, *Cultural Wars in American Politics* (Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997). James Hunter (*Culture Wars*) argues that culture wars exist in the institutionalized rhetorics and symbols of U.S. public life, even if we find only limited evidence of such battles through traditional attitude surveys; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson ("Have Americans' Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?" *American Journal of Sociology* 102/3 (1996): 690–755) are more skeptical about the existence of widespread culture wars, as are Smith and his colleagues (Chris Smith, with Michael Emerson, Sally Gallagher, Paul Kennedy) and David Sikkink, "The Myth of Culture Wars: The Case of American Protestantism," in Rhys Williams, *Cultural Wars*, 175–195.
11. For the classic formulation of the public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 49–55, and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). Critical appropriations extend Habermas's vision by conceiving of multiple public spheres, and by considering identity work itself as a "public" task for participants in those spheres. Besides Fraser ("Rethinking the Public Sphere"), Mouffe ("Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community" and "Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics"), and West ("The New Cultural Politics of Difference"), see Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," in Craig Calhoun, editor, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 1–48; Geoff Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," in Calhoun, ibid.; Mary Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America," in Calhoun, ibid.; Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, *Feminism as Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) and especially Iris Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public," in Benhabib and Cornell, ibid., 56–76.
12. See, for instance, Calhoun, *Habermas;* Michael Schudson, "Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case," in Calhoun, ibid.; Margaret Somers, "What's Political or Cultural about Political Culture and the Public Sphere: Toward an Historical Sociology of Concept Formation," *Sociological Theory* 13 (1995): 113–144; Paul Lichterman, "Beyond the Seesaw Model: Public Commitment in a Culture of Self-Fulfillment," *Sociological Theory* 13: 275–300; Ronald Jacobs, "Civil Society and Crisis: Culture, Discourse, and the Rodney

King Beating," *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1996): 1238–1272; Nina Eliasoph, "Making a Fragile Public: A Talk-Centered Study of Citizenship and Power," *Sociological Theory* 14/3 (1996): 262–289.

13. Studies of ideological "framing" in social movements constitute one widely cited version of this approach. See David Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven Worden, and Robert Benford, "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 464–481; David Snow and Robert Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization," in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow, editors, *International Social Movement Research* 1 (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988), 197–217; Scott Hunt, Robert Benford, and David Snow, "Identity Fields: Framing Processes and the Social Construction of Movement Identities," in Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph Gusfield, editors, *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 185–208. See also Mary Bernstein's argument that lesbian and gay activists deploy identity strategically to accomplish various ends ("Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement," *American Journal of Sociology* 103/3 (1997): 531–565).
14. See the introductory discussion of "strategic framing" in Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, and Mayer Zald, editors, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Steve Hart ("The Cultural Dimension of Social Movements: A Theoretical Reassessment and Literature Review," *Sociology of Religion* 57 (1996): 87–100) and Emirbayer and Goodwin ("Symbols, Positions, Objects: Situating 'Culture' within Social Movement Theory," paper presented at American Sociological Association Annual meetings, New York, 1996) similarly suggest that there are limits as well as benefits in understanding opinion-forming as strategic action.
15. See, for instance, Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere"; Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992). For contemporary and historical examples, see Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*; Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Harry Boyte, "The Pragmatic Ends of Popular Politics," (in Calhoun, *Habermas*), 340–355, *CommonWealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1989); Mary Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America."
16. In *Making History: The Radical Tradition in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), Flacks argues that movements' important effects include political socialization, especially under a post-World War II "social contract" that privatized a lot of decision-making about economic power and political participation.
17. See especially Carol Mueller's treatment of Melucci's work in "Conflict Networks and the Origins of Women's Liberation," in Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, and Joseph Gusfield, *New Social Movements*, 234–263. Relevant works by Melucci include *Nomads of the Present* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), and "The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements" *Social Research* 52 (1985): 789–816. For orienting statements about movement identity and empirical examples, see Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield, *New Social Movements*, and Aldon Morris and Carol Mueller, *Frontiers of Social Movement Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

18. But see Nina Eliasoph, "Making a Fragile Public," and *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) for an exemplar; see Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) for different kinds of public-spirited talk in different grassroots movements; see also Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
19. See Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community*. This work did not treat identity politics as defined in note 1 here.
20. By social identity I mean, similarly to John Hewitt (*Dilemmas of the American Self* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989)), the relation that someone maintains with an array of communities or institutions, or cultural authorities, a relation we can find in everyday talk, as when someone says, "as queers, we should support the pro-choice march." Along complementary lines, Michele Lamont and Laurent Thévenot hold that reference groups influence the ways people draw the boundaries of their communities; see their volume on the evaluative criteria people use to draw political, racial, civic, artistic, and professional boundaries, Michele Lamont and Laurent Thévenot, editors, *Comparing Cultures and Polities: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States* (forthcoming).
21. For examples of the "cultural structure" notion, see Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, "The discourse of American civil society: A new proposal for cultural studies," *Theory and Society* 22 (1993): 151–207; Margaret Somers, "What's Political or Cultural about Political Culture and the Public Sphere;" William Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1992): 1–29; Eric Rambo and Elaine Chan, "Text, Structure, and Action in Cultural Sociology," *Theory and Society* 19 (1990): 635–648; Michele Lamont and Laurent Thévenot, editors, *Comparing Cultures and Polities*. See also Robert Wuthnow, *Meaning and Moral Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). The phrase "cultural structure" gets employed earliest in Rambo and Chan, and Alexander and Smith.
22. "Community interest politics" should not be confused with "local communitarian activism," a different cultural structure explored in *The Search for Political Community*.
23. I describe a participant-observer's approach to social identities and solidarities more extensively in "What do Movements Mean?" *Qualitative Sociology* 21/4 (1998): 401–418.
24. I will comment more extensively on these issues in a future book.
25. See, for instance, the reactions of lgbt newspaper readers to the word "queer," in Joshua Gamson, "Must Identity Movements Self Destruct? A Queer Dilemma" *Social Problems* 42 (1995): 101–118. A specifically "queer"-named politics is receiving considerable attention, especially in debates about the construction of homosexuality. There is no consensus on the meaning of "queer." Some scholars and activists use it simply as a synonym for "lesbian and gay." For others, queer communicates the claim that sexual identity is fluid, indeterminate. Some use the word to signify a style of aggressive visibility, complementing a radical politics of lgbt liberation; for others the word connotes a rejection of conventionality across the social map. See Lisa Duggan, "Making it Perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review* 22 (1992): 11–32; Steven Epstein, "A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality," *Sociological Theory* 12 (1994): 188–202; and Janice Irvine, "A Place in the Rainbow," *Sociological Theory* 12 (1994): 232–248.

26. Whether or not this surprise stemmed from unexamined homophobia on my part, it did help me identify an intriguing puzzle for further investigation in the field, and further theoretical work. Identifying "surprises" in this way is a crucial part of the extended case method of participant-observation, which this study followed in large part. See Michael Burawoy et al., *Ethnography Unbound*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
27. See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), and Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).
28. See Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*; Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community.*
29. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 124.
30. See, for instance, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
31. For a different assessment of queer politics, based on the deconstructive meaning of queer, see Joshua Gamson, "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma."
32. Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community.*
33. Major statements of this viewpoint include Melucci, *Nomads of the Present*; Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Herbert Kitschelt, "New Social Movements in West Germany and the United States," *Political Power and Social Theory* 5 (1985): 273–324.
34. For versions of this argument, see Steven Barkan, "Strategic, Tactical, and Organizational Dilemmas of the Protest Movement Against Nuclear Power," *Social Problems* 27 (1979): 19–37; Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Suzanne Staggenborg, "The Consequences of Professionalization and Formalization in the Pro-Choice Movement," *American Sociological Review* 53 (1988): 585–606.
35. For an interesting argument that emphasizes organizational, implicitly strategic forces in the shaping of "gay" and "queer" identity, see Joshua Gamson, "The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York," *Sociological Forum* 11/2 (1996): 231–261.
36. See Calhoun, "Community without Propinquity Revisited: Categorical Identities, Relational Networks, and the Electronic Communication," paper given at American Sociological Association annual meetings, New York, 1996.
37. For personalized politics, see B. Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution*; Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community*; Barkan, "Strategic, Tactical, and Organizational Dilemmas." For examples of community interest talk at the grassroots, see Gary Delgado, *Organizing the Movement: The Roots and Growth of ACORN* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); William Kornblum, *Blue Collar Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). A third style of grassroots politics, "local communitarian," upholds a unitary community but depends on shared traditions and shared history more than instrumental ties. It, too, has influenced a variety of citizens' political groups in the U.S.; see Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community*; Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Certainly, grassroots groups can be shaped by more than one of these three structures.
38. See *The Search for Political Community.*
39. See B. Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution*.

40. Fraser recently makes a similar point in *Justice Interruptus*, 4. Referring to computer-mediated communication like that on the Internet, Craig Calhoun ("Community without Propinquity Revisited") similarly warns against expecting public-spirited discourse to arise when interlocutors are limited to categorical identities.
41. See William Gamson, "Safe Spaces and Social Movements," *Perspectives on Social Problems* 8 (1996): 27–38.