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References

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LGBT

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The ubiquitous use of the LGBT initialism across various social, academic, and political discursive contexts in the United States suggests that the constitutive categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender are equivalent, informed by similar experiences, and, as such, appropriate to collapse into a single category: LGBT. This brief analysis of LGBT, or what Dean Spade (2004: 53) incisively dubs “LGB-fake-T,” highlights the ways in which its consolidation and subsequent circulation produce troubling exclusions and marginalizations when it is taken to represent a cohesive collection of identities and political interests.

Denaturalizing the presumed coherence of LGBT requires attention to how the constitutive categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender have been linked to concepts of gender and sexuality. Joanne J. Meyerowitz (2002), in
her history of transsexuality in the United States, traces the processes through
which doctors after World War II began to theorize sex as biological, gender as
socially shaped, and sexuality as desire.¹ Nan Boyd’s 2003 history of queer San
Francisco furnishes a useful analysis of how these theoretical distinctions between
gender and sexuality later influenced assimilationist lesbian and gay political
groups, some of which made concerted efforts to align their respective identities
exclusively with private expressions of same-sex desire (i.e., sexuality) and away
from public expressions of nonnormative gender. The emergence of a seemingly
bounded transgender category in the 1990s that attends these increasingly rigid
conceptualizations of gay and lesbian categories is compellingly argued by David
Valentine (2007) to enable imagining gender variance outside the categories of
lesbian and gay, the result of which was the construction of white, gender-nor-
mative lesbian and gay subjects, a construction that poses transgender people,
butches, queens, cross-dressers, working-class bar-goers, queer people of color,
and all combinations thereof as deviant, or other.

It is from this brief overview that the question of how LGBT began to
circulate arises. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, some transgender activists in
the United States argued that they ought to be included in the mobilizations of
mainstream lesbian and gay political groups. They cited the policing of normative
femininity and masculinity as the roots of the discrimination that they were fighting,
the violence of which is equally directed at transgender people, lesbian women, and
gay men. In response, and perhaps seeing the value of demonstrating a commitment
to diversity and inclusion within a liberal, rights-based political context, various
lesbian and gay groups amended their titles and mission statements to claim that
they serve the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, communities.

Though some consider LGBT utopian in its commitment to inclusion and
representation, its widespread use has also been subject to strong critiques that
depart from the position that listing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
identities in the LGBT initialism poses them as discrete, ordered categories. For
instance, Susan Stryker (2008: 148) argues that listing “T” with “LGB”—and at the
end, no less—locates transgender as an orientation. In other words, LGBT privi-
leges the expression of sexual identity over gender identity, the result of which is
the conflation of transgender with desire rather than with expressions of gender
that inflect sexuality. The paradox of LGBT, then, is that although the inclusion of
transgender alongside lesbian, gay, and bisexual opened up new political alliances
across these groups, it also closed off possibilities for coalitions with different
political groups—such as activists fighting for immigrant rights who face con-
cerns over documentation that are similar to those of transgender people—by
naturalizing sexuality as the similarity that binds lesbian, gay, bisexual, and
transgender groups together.
Zein Murib is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Minnesota whose dissertation traces the historical and political processes through which “LGBT” evolved as a political identity category in the United States between 1970 and 2010.

Note
1. The relationship of sexuality to gender has been actively taken up by feminists and queer theorists as well. See Judith Butler’s “Against Proper Objects” (1994) and “GLQ Forum: Thinking Sex/Thinking Gender” (2004).

References

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