



## ACTIVE DUTY

TWO NEW BOOKS EXPLORE  
ACTIVISM AND ANTIASSIMILATION

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It seems like every day there's a new headline about another "victory" for gay rights advocates, from Obama repealing "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) to Washington becoming the seventh state to legalize same-sex marriage. Here in Seattle, it's easy to feel like you're spitting on the gay-wedding parade if you're not reposting or tweeting about how you were moved to tears by Washington State Republican Rep. Maureen Walsh's testimony about gay marriage, the video of which went viral.

In Walsh's testimony, she says she can't bring herself to deny anyone, including her gay daughter, the "incredible bond" of commitment she had with her late husband. While I appreciated Walsh's willingness to be vulnerable on the floor of the state capitol, it also feels disappointing that a straight welcome into the institution of marriage is now being hailed as the pinnacle of success for queer activism.



As a queer feminist, I question whether state-sanctioned gay relationships really mean that it's "getting better" for all queers. Rather than insisting on our right to the benefits that come with legal marriage, we should be insisting on access to healthcare, immigration rights, and economic equality, regardless of our relationship status. Known for our creativity, queers have historically constructed a wide variety of relationship models, chosen families, and intercultural practices, but this creativity is getting squelched in the current model of assimilation that says "our relationships are just like yours"—except for our sexual preferences.

Queer activism had a startlingly different beginning. In the 1960s and '70s, gay liberation movements grew out of other liberation struggles and were deeply intertwined with feminist and antiracist movements. With a strong intersectional analysis, queers challenged the state and capitalism because gay lives themselves were antithetical to mainstream acceptance. However, over time, as gay activism has become institutionalized through organizations such as Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), its focus has narrowed to a model of assimilation that begs for gay inclusion into oppressive institutions, such as marriage and the military. But who is benefiting from this inclusion, and more important, who is being left behind?

I was heartened to read two powerful books, *Against Equality: Don't Ask to Fight Their Wars* (Against Equality Press) and *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits*

## AS GAY ACTIVISM HAS BECOME INSTITUTIONALIZED, ITS FOCUS HAS NARROWED TO A MODEL OF ASSIMILATION THAT BEGS FOR GAY INCLUSION INTO OPPRESSIVE INSTITUTIONS. BUT WHO IS BENEFITING FROM THIS INCLUSION, AND MORE IMPORTANT, WHO IS BEING LEFT BEHIND?

*of Law* (South End Press), which answer that question by showing how LGBT activism (the Q-less acronym of choice for both works) has moved steadily toward incorporating white, middle-class gays into existing social structures and away from its roots as a radical movement that challenges the status quo. By focusing on maintaining the race and class privileges of a small group of people, this activism often leaves out immigrants, people with disabilities, people of color, trans people, and poor people.

The *Against Equality* anthology, the second in the editorial collective's series of books challenging LGBT assimilation, compiles queer essays that question the militarization of gay identity, which is particularly important now that DADT has been repealed. While

we don't always hear their voices in the mainstream press, radical queers have been consistently speaking out against gay inclusion in the military. These authors argue that strengthening the right of gays to "come out" in the military should not be part of a queer agenda because pouring time, money, and energy into repealing DADT has diverted resources away from basic survival issues, such as access to housing and healthcare for the most vulnerable LGBT people. They argue, furthermore, that the military-industrial complex itself drains money that could be used for social services, exploits poor and working-class people (particularly people of color), and reinforces racism and sexism.

Looking at the history of the Gay Liberation Front, which formed around the time of the Stonewall Riots, Jamal Rashad Jones argues that the GLF "took a stance against capitalism, racism, and patriarchy in all their forms." But, as we have gained some acceptance, mainstream LGBT groups have been willing to abandon our former ideals of fighting intersecting oppressions in order to fight for inclusion into institutions such as the military. For example, Lieutenant Dan Choi, who became an activist for repealing DADT after he was discharged from the army, rallied for gay inclusion in the military by saying, "War is a force that gives us meaning." In the introduction of *Against Equality*, Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore counters, "What, exactly, is the meaning of the U.S. obliterating Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan?"

I have often wondered how to respond to straight people who show their support for queers by supporting mainstream LGBT assimilation, so it was refreshing to read Tamara K. Nopper's essay challenging straight people on the left to think critically about these issues. Nopper posits that self-professed straight "allies" endorse mainstream professional LGBT politics and organizations given their "shared bourgeois notions of 'respectable' (i.e., not offensive to straight people) gay politics that also promote a middle class notion of democracy." Because professional LGBT organizations have the resources to promote their agendas more widely, it is easier for straight people to support LGBT views that do not threaten the status quo than it is for them to do the work it would take to seek out radical queer voices. But Nopper questions whose best interests are on the line when straight allies support queers openly serving in jobs where they have to kill and control others in the service of U.S. imperialism.

While the anthology offers numerous (and necessary) critiques of gay militarization, I'm not sure if it will reach an audience who isn't already on board with a queer antiassimilationist stance. Because of its focus and brevity (around 80 pages), it provides only a glimpse of an alternative queer agenda that includes access to universal healthcare, housing rights, and resistance to the military and prison industrial complexes.

In *Normal Life*, author Dean Spade opens with a similar critique of the recent mainstreaming of the LGBT movement, but he takes up where *Against Equality* leaves off. Spade demonstrates how returning to an intersectional analysis of oppression can help build a truly alternative vision of a queer and trans movement—"critical trans politics"—that can specifically improve trans people's lives and build coalitions to challenge interlocking systems of power. Although academic in nature, *Normal Life* manages to pair complex theoretical arguments with practical examples of activism. Spade doesn't just



present evidence to indict gay politics as usual; he also provides a concrete look at how a contemporary liberatory queer political movement can work, with real-world applications that breathe life into some of his denser theories.

Building upon insights from critical race theory, women-of-color feminism, and disability studies, Spade constructs a compelling argument that, as LGBT activism has moved toward a focus on individual legal rights (marriage, hate-crimes legislation, and inclusion in the military), it has increasingly left out vulnerable queer populations. Spade questions the assumption that as trans activism emerges, it should follow the mainstream path by reforming laws to include the rights of individual trans people.

Spade argues that because an individual legal-rights framework focuses on stopping intentional discrimination against a targeted group, it fundamentally misrepresents the way power works. The model of perpetrator vs. victim masks institutional and systemic oppression. Instead of focusing on legal rights, therefore, Spade directs our attention to government “population management,” analyzing how gender functions as a supposedly “neutral” administrative category, but actually makes trans people vulnerable to state control in their day-to-day lives.

He explains this idea of population management by showing how misclassification in identity documents harms trans people. Trans people have a difficult time getting their gender changed on essential documents (such as driver’s licenses and passports) because different government agencies have different rules about what kind of evidence is required to change one’s gender. Many require different types of medical evidence (a doctor’s letter or proof of surgery), while a few require only self-identification. Carrying identity documents that misidentify one’s gender—or ones that contradict each other—can prevent trans people from getting jobs, lead to increased vulnerability in interactions with police or government officials, and make it difficult to do everyday activities like cash checks or travel.

Contradictory identity documents can also prevent trans people from accessing necessary sex-segregated facilities, such as public bathrooms, drug treatment centers, and homeless shelters. In addition, officials may use identity documents to force trans people into prisons or immigrant facilities that contradict their gender, which often leads to harassment and assault. The risk of being targeted through misclassification of identity documents has been heightened by the culture of surveillance created by the “War on Terror,” which uses identity to persecute society’s most vulnerable citizens in the name of national security.

Spade argues that this culture of surveillance offers an opportunity for building coalitions among populations who face heightened scrutiny. For example, he describes how the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, a nonprofit law collective that provides free legal service to trans, intersex, and gender-nonconforming people, participated in a coalition of immigrant-rights organizations that formed to protest changes being made by the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles. In order to exclude immigrants without documents from getting driver’s licenses, New York began comparing its DMV records to federal Social Security records and suspending the licenses of anyone with conflicting data. This change impacted trans and non-trans immigrants, as well as many trans people who were not immigrants.

The Sylvia Rivera Law Project worked with immigrant rights groups in the mid-2000s to fight back against New York State’s changes, thus modeling trans coalition work that refuses to scapegoat populations targeted by racist, xenophobic policy changes. All the groups involved increased their understanding of trans and immigrant issues. By focusing on an intersection where trans and immigration issues collide, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project refused to put the rights of a universal category of nonimmigrant trans people above all other identities, and thus was able to join a coalition to fight against interlocking forms of oppression.

With a focus on real trans people’s lives and intersecting identities, activists are making demands that are rooted in racial and economic

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justice rather than legal inclusion and recognition. By resisting the mainstream LGBT agenda of fighting for legal equality and single-issue politics, queer and trans communities are creating the kinds of spaces, according to Spade, “where questions of survival and distribution are centered, where the well-being of the most vulnerable will not be compromised for promises of legal and media recognition, where the difficult work of building participatory resistance led from the bottom up is undertaken, where we can seek the emergence of deeply transformative trans resistance.”

With *Normal Life*, Spade has succeeded in reframing the terms of LGBT politics by building a far-reaching vision for queer and trans politics that is rooted in community work that has already begun. While his academic tone and dense theoretical framework may limit who can read and understand this book, I find it both inspiring and entirely conceivable to picture more queer and trans people refusing to join oppressive institutions in order to attain their “rights,” and instead attempting to transform the social order itself by fighting interconnecting forms of power.

Together, *Against Equality* and *Normal Life* lay out a road map for queer and trans activists that leads neither to the altar nor to war, but guides us to resist state power by building community and returning to our radical roots. **B**

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