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**An Incomplete Rainbow**

**Queer freedom and the tolerance trap**



*Image: Julia Schmalz*

By Suzanna Danuta Walters

When I came out, at 16, in those fashion-challenged late 70s when tweedy jackets and pinky rings had to do hard labor in signifying lesbian identity, my (liberal) mother sent me to a shrink before she began her queer re-education and joined the cause, righteous pink triangle pinned on her ample bosom. I knew not one other gay kid, there were no support groups in my high school, and I felt so very alone until I blissfully discovered gay bars, gay bookstores, and the gay movement. Now my 19-year-old daughter (after a high-school career of being the "s" in gay-straight alliances) seems to imagine she gains street cred by claiming queer provenance and goes to a college where gender bending is just another day and creative pronouns business as usual.

In truth, I couldn’t have imagined the world we live in now—some of us, that is, here in America. The changes have been well documented. In media, *Orange Is the New Black* reigns, and queers increasingly pop up in everyday dramas and award-winning comedies. In politics, more gays and lesbians are in local and national office, and antidiscrimination laws are de rigueur for the Fortune 500 and some municipalities. In our private lives, earnest heterosexuals declare their support for gay rights and their fondness for their gay friends, neighbors, family members. "Don’t ask, don’t tell" has been repealed, and marriage equality seems to have won the day, prompting more than one blogger to note that it’s fashionable to support gay marriage.

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I could go on. But that story is oft told. A familiar narrative of inevitable progress, it wraps us in a warm blanket of American exceptionalism. Pundits and pollsters declare, with more unanimity than is typical in political prognostications, that the end of homophobia is just around the corner. Breathless tales of the triumph of tolerance and self-satisfied encomiums on our post-gay new world dominate our national discourse, with dissenting voices to be found only on the wary queer left and the furious Christian right. For most, marriage + military inclusion + a few queers on TV = rainbow nirvana.

Like most progress narratives and happy endings, this story has more than a few holes. In the midst of all the back-patting, queers still regularly get bashed, our youth are disproportionately homeless and suicidal, and few avoid the harsh sting of everyday bigotry. Queers of color garner little benefit from the marriage mania, and trans identities remain a site of violence and ridicule, or occasionally Katie Couric-style genital fascination, as evidenced in her interviews with the model Carmen Carrera and the *Orange Is the New Black* star Laverne Cox.

The majority of states still have Defense of Marriage-type statutes restricting matrimony to opposite-sex couples. Still we are unable to pass a federal employment-nondiscrimination act. Still an openly gay athlete like Michael Sam or a newly out minor celebrity is cause for an overwrought news frenzy. Even the ballyhooed arena of popular culture features largely tokenized gay add-ons, bitchy gay best friends, and the occasional assimilated gay white dude. Sometimes a trickle seems like a downpour when you’ve been in the desert so long.

Anti-gay efforts may have been blunted, but the sharp knives of homophobia are seen in recent efforts in several states to pass draconian measures in the name of religious freedom. Indeed, just when it seemed that Uganda and Russia were duking it out as top contenders in (as *The Daily Show* put it) the Homophobic Olympics, our own fundamentalists stepped into the winner’s circle. In 2013-14 alone, at least six states have initiated these bills, with one passing in Mississippi and others still in the works. These Republican-backed bills would institute a version of Jim Crow, legalizing discrimination against gay people in myriad new and creative ways. Not only would employers (still, since we have no employment-nondiscrimination act) be able to fire gays, but restaurants could refuse to serve gay customers, hotels could shut their doors on gay travelers, cake makers could turn down gay wedding planners (Really? You want to turn down that business?), and stores could refuse to sell products to gay shoppers.

Sound familiar? This is all done, no surprise, in the name of "religious freedom." Indeed, it is cannily framed as "protecting" those Americans whose hatred of gays is religiously motivated. During the hearings for the Kansas version of this bill, one supporter—state Rep. Charles Macheers—even opined against the evils of discrimination, turning anti-gay religious sentiment into a civil right to be protected. And opposition to these laws—from our national politicians and corporate leaders—more often comes in the form of a bad-for-business argument than the ethical outrage the statutes should inspire. The good witch and the bad witch have clearly traded places in the topsy-turvy world of homegrown homophobia.

The progress narrative, then, depends on a very gaudy pair of rose-colored glasses, through which continuing discrimination and inequity are either ignored or seen as remnants of a past we are about to put behind us. Worse, the triumphalist story is tethered to tolerance as both the means and the end of gay liberation. Now, what individual doesn’t want to be seen as tolerant? It heralds openness to difference and a generally broad-minded disposition. Indeed, one of the primary definitions of "tolerance" signifies sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one’s own. But it is a word and a practice with a more complicated history and with real limitations. The late Middle English origins of the word indicate the ability to bear pain and hardship. In fact, some of the first uses of the word can be found in medieval pharmacology and toxicology, dealing with how much poison a body can "tolerate" before it succumbs to a foreign substance.

In contemporary times, we speak of a tolerance to something as the capacity to endure continued subjection to it (a plant, a drug, a minority group) without adverse reactions. We speak of people who have a high tolerance for pain or worry about a generation developing a tolerance for a certain type of antibiotic because of overuse. In scientific usage, it refers to the allowable amount of variation of a specified quantity—the amount let in before the thing itself alters so fundamentally that it becomes something else and the experiment fails. So tolerance almost always implies or assumes something negative or undesired or even a variation contained and circumscribed.

It doesn’t make sense to say that we tolerate something unless we think that it’s wrong in some way. To say you "tolerate" homosexuality is to imply that homosexuality is bad or immoral or even just benignly icky, like that exotic food you just can’t bring yourself to try. You are willing to put up with, to tolerate, this nastiness, but the toleration proves the thing (the person, the sexuality, the food) to be irredeemably nasty to begin with.

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But here’s the rub: If there is nothing problematic about something—say, homosexuality—then there is really nothing to tolerate. We don’t speak of tolerating great sex or a good book or a sunshine-filled day. We do, however, take pains to let others know how brave we are when we tolerate the discomfort of a bad back or a nasty cold. We tolerate the agony of a frustratingly banal movie that our partner insisted on watching and are thought the better for it. We tolerate, in other words, that which we would rather avoid. Tolerance is not an embrace but a resigned shrug or, worse, that air kiss of faux familiarity that barely covers up the shiver of disgust.

Worse yet, tolerance depends on an even more problematic discourse of immutability to give it ballast and energy. Professoriate, take note: If you need to give your students an example of a "hegemonic ideology," look no further. Immutability wins the dominant-discourse sweepstakes. "Born this way" is a tenacious infestation that has spread from person to person, pundit to pundit, like a medieval plague. I hate to blame Lady Gaga, but there you have it. Come to think of it, a more au courant example would be this year’s Grammy sensation Macklemore, whose heartfelt anthem to tolerance—"Same Love"—includes the worrisome words "And I can’t change … even if I tried, even if I wanted to."

Like a kudzu vine colonizing everything within its reach, the idea that sexual desire and identity are hard-wired (through lavender DNA, or an endocrine system that washes the infant in homo fantasies, or a kinky hypothalamus) reaches into legal arguments, familial conversions, political speeches, Broadway musicals, teen television, movement websites, and, of course, pop songs. And it saturates our news coverage, exemplified most recently by a *New York Times Magazine* cover story about attempts to prove, through the same tired pseudoscience, that bisexuality exists.

Just as we have come to take it for granted that right-thinking people believe homosexuality is innate and hard-wired (either through genetics or through some broader combination of genes and hormones), we have also come to believe that wrong-thinking people—either vicious homophobes or simply ill-informed onlookers—insist on gayness as choice and volitional lifestyle. The polls consistently demonstrate this: More people believe gayness (no one ever asks about the straight gene, of course) is somehow predetermined (47 percent in Gallup’s May 2013 poll), and those people are more likely to support gay rights.

We would be foolish to believe the fantasy that somehow "proving" immutability would easily and automatically nullify anti-gay animus and homophobia and lead to tolerance. On the contrary, biological arguments about immutable differences and inherent otherness have long been used to demonize, discriminate, and otherwise victimize those who are deemed inferior by "nature" of their birth (Jews), skin color (African-Americans), and sex (women). Not surprisingly, women in general and lesbians and feminists in particular have approached the biological arguments much more cautiously than men have. And the born-gay doctrine was certainly not the mantra of 60s gay radicals and liberationists. I’m always surprised at the persistent and naïve commitment to this fantasy, a commitment that seems to fly in the face of most of our history, in which biological theories of difference have been marshaled not in the service of liberation but rather in the service of categorization, medical experimentation, and even annihilation.

If a "tolerant" disposition toward gayness seems, in our world, to depend on a deep commitment to biological-determinist ideas of sexuality, what’s a good feminist to do? How did we go from gay liberation to gay predisposition? Or even from gay pride to tolerance, immutability, acceptance? Such a far cry from the days of "We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it." The tolerance trap murmurs instead, "We’re here, we’re not really queer but vaguely gayish, be nice to us."

Tolerance is not just a low bar; it actively undercuts robust integration and social belonging by allowing the warp and woof of anti-gay animus to go unchallenged. Tolerance allows us to celebrate (hysterically) the coming out of macho professional athletes as a triumphant sign of liberation rather than a sad commentary on the persistence of the closet and the hold of masculinist ideals. Tolerance allows religious "objections" to queer lives to remain in place, even as it claims that a civilized society leaves its homos alone. Tolerance pushes for marriage equality and simultaneously assures anxious allies that it won’t change their marriages or their lives.

And there you see the crux of the tolerance trap: If an ostensible concession doesn’t challenge straight lives, it’s not very radical, and if it does challenge them, it’s not a concession gays and lesbians will win. The marriage assurances are similar to gay responses to right-wing attacks on queer parents: Researchers and advocates argue that "no harm" is done to our kids, that there is no difference between gay and straight parenting. But couldn’t we imagine the strong case? Shouldn’t we argue, instead, that our progeny would/could grow up with more expansive and creative ways of living gender and sexuality? Shouldn’t we argue that same-sex marriage might make us all think differently about the relationship between domestic life and gender norms and push heterosexuals to examine their stubborn commitment to a gendered division of labor?

Difference does, well, make a difference. But when difference is erased in the quest to make us more tolerable to those heterosexuals who get to do the tolerating, when the messiness and fluidity of sexual desire and identity are put into the straitjacket of biological inevitability, when queer challenges to gender rules and regulations are morphed into nuptial sameness, and when queer freedoms are reduced to the right to wed, we all lose out. President Obama’s moving second Inaugural Address links Stonewall to the great lineage of American social movements. But then it modifies that sweep by signifying those rights as marital: "For if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well." The history of Stonewall and other queer riots and rebellions is then reduced, dulled, narrowed.

Americans are rightfully outraged at Kremlin-style homophobia and horrified by the possibility of death sentences and flogging in several African countries. But we would do well to take a closer look into our own "tolerant" heart. Much has changed in America. Dedicated community activists, gender-bending queer youth, and even some of us retro radicals a bit long in the tooth do often sidestep the (almost) all-encompassing discourse of tolerance and immutability. But the time for easy celebration is not yet here. Anti-gay animus is not a remnant of a transcended past, nor is it the province of passé nations "over there." It runs through our cultural waterways in pure red, white, and blue. The road to a real Oz is still littered with land mines, and Dorothy’s rainbow seems more and more like a dream deferred.

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