Diversity Initiatives in Higher Education

Deconstructing "The Down Low"— People of Color "Coming Out" and "Being Out" on Campus:

A Conversation with Mark Brimhall-Vargas, Sivagami Subbaraman, and Robert Waters[1]

By Christine Clark[2]

Introduction

This article emerges from an extensive conversation with three people of color—one Latino, one South Asian, and one African American—about their experiences of "coming out" and "being out" as gay, lesbian, and bisexual in a variety of higher education contexts. The article is divided into three parts.

Part one offers a brief overview of intersectional analysis. This overview sets the context for understanding the conversants' discourse in the ensuing parts of the article.

In part two, the conversants discuss the uniqueness of their gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity in relationship to their racial minority identity, broadly conceptualized. Here, four themes emerge: (1) the gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity, Whiteness, and marginalization; (2) the role of multiple identities in challenging assumptions about affinity with the gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity; (3) off-campus life and the gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity for people for color; and (4) White hegemony and the limited expression of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity on campus.

Finally, part three of this article summarizes the important points from the conversants' dialogue and teases out the implications of these points for higher education.

Intersectional Analysis

Much media attention of late has been given to the phenomenon referred to as "the down low" or "the 'D. L.'" Broadly defined, this phenomenon refers to the practice of Black men having clandestine sex with other men, in particular other Black men, all the while maintaining a public heterosexual identity. Author J. L. King goes one step further in defining this phenomenon as "Black men who have sex with men, but relationships with women" (2004, p. 2). Operative in this definition is the absence, denial, perhaps even the rejection of, the term "gay," and, in many cases, the term "bisexual" as well. Most men who identify as being "on the down low," as this phrase has been applied in popular culture, do not identify as gay, nor even as bisexual.

Taking a step back, it is important to consider why it is that a phenomenon that at other times and in relationship to other populations has, more matter of factly, been described as simply "being in the closet" as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person, is now being directed at Black men alone. Certainly, U.S. culture has the habit of continually finding fault with Black men, especially those who achieve visible measures of success, though it is often images of those who are the least successful to whom mass culture devotes the greatest attention in service to the social construction, production, and continual reproduction of the stereotype (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003).

It is also important to examine how the expression "the down low" that, for some time, has been used largely in urban cultural arenas to describe *any* secretive phenomenon, has been appropriated by the mainstream (read "White" and "middle-class") to describe *only* the secretive sexual liaisons of Black men.

Many responses to the sensationalization of the "Black male down low" intimate that those this phrase is used to describe, even that those who use it to describe themselves, are really gay or bisexual and are simply running from these labels because of internalized homophobia. This is what professor Henry Giroux refers to as "fugitive identity"—where people run from accurate identity descriptors when those descriptors have been socially constructed as negative by mass culture (1996).

Other responses to the "Black male down low" hullabaloo suggest that internalized homophobia is not the culprit, but rather that cultural homophobia is—the Black community does not accept homosexuality as normal, thus Black gay and bisexual men are culturally induced to hide their sexual identity (King, 2004). This response erroneously assumes that non-Black, or at least White, communities are less culturally homophobic, and that the Black community is monolithic in its cultural homophobia and, perhaps, in general. It also implies that Black men's sexual identity or, again perhaps, their identity as a whole (i.e., as Black, as male, etc.), is more important than Black women's, since virtually no attention is given to Black women as lesbian or bisexual. In this latter instance, the culturally homophobic and monolithic Black community is also often erroneously assumed to be more culturally sexist than non-Black, or again at least White, communities (King, 2004).

It is true that homophobia and sexism are alive and well in all non-Black, including White, communities. It is also true that within Black and non-Black communities there is progressive ideology—ideology that embraces gay, lesbian, and bisexual people as normal and women as equal to men in all regards. It is also true that cultural com-

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munities define and express homophobia, sexism, as well as progressive ideology, in very different ways and so what may appear to be homophobic, sexist, and/or progressive in one cultural context may be quite different in another. For non-dominant groups in particular, these differences are not the function of culture as a discrete signifier, but of cultural location relative to the dominant group.

In this article, it is crucial that the relationship between culture and cultural location are foregrounded. In order to understand how coming out and/or being out as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color is—and, in many ways, must be—different than it is for White people, this relationship must also be understood. The growing body of research and scholarship on intersectional analysis provides the tools for coming to both of these understandings.

Intersectional analysis emerged out of international human rights law, specifically from race and gender based anti-discrimination standards developed by the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (CWGL, 2000).

> Women's rights advocates have made important inroads into making gender-specific abuses and violations of women more visible and hence more likely remedied. Racial justice advocates have made important advances into raising the bar for the exercise of civil and human rights. However, the conceptual difficulty of clearly understanding and intervening in the abuses and violations of the women who experience multiple and layered identities and hence compounding and intersecting discriminations remains a persistent challenge to social justice and women rights advocates everywhere. (Darling, 2002, p.1)

Given this history, it is not surprising that intersectional analysis emerged in the academy from the research and scholarship of women of color. Deriving from intellectual consciousness based on the sum of their personal, academic, and professional experiences, intersectional analysis allows consideration of multiple dimensions of difference (based on, for example, race, gender, and socioeconomic class) simultaneously.

> The systematic study of the intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of difference is flexible enough to consider large-scale, historically constructed and hierarchical power systems and the politics of interpersonal interactions, including meanings and representations in the experience of individuals. Ideological, political, and economic systems shift and change over time and in different cultural environments. Individuals and groups experience these systems differently according to their social, geographic, historical, and cultural locations, and—when not situated in positions of power—often resist oppression. Knowledge about the system is gained and shared especially among those who work from 'outsider within' (Collins, 1983) or 'border' (Anzaldua, 1999) locations that give them access to the system but do not complete inclusion within it. (Thornton Dill, Nettles, & Weber, 2002, p. 1)

Unlike exclusively centric analysis in which one social identity dimension is examined, almost as if in a vacuum, and then *juxtaposed*, in a highly dichotomous fashion, with other dimensions, intersectional analysis enables race and gender and socioeconomic class, etc., to be woven together in complex, competing and synergistic, complementary and cacophonous, ultimately tapestrial manners toward the chrysalis of more exacting sociopolitical realities. Knowledge of these realities can then be applied to solve real world problems, especially for members of multiply oppressed or otherwise disenfranchised and underrepresented groups.

> While scholars in a number of fields study dimensions of difference and use difference as a way to explain social and cultural variations in research, the new scholarship is distinguished by the fact that it is interdisciplinary and focuses on the ways dimensions of difference intersect to create new and distinct social, cultural, and artistic forms. (Thornton Dill, Nettles, & Weber, 2002, p. 1)

More recently, intersectional analysis has been broadened by adoption to a broader array of academic disciplines—disciplines like women's studies, ethnic studies, critical legal and race studies—that are, by definition, interdisciplinary. These include, but are not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies, religious studies, sociology and anthropology, even biological science and technology. As adoption of this analytical approach has broadened, so too has the base of scholars who employ it to include men of color, White women, as well as White men.

> Though diverse in subject matter and format, intersectional work is characterized by: (1) an analytical strategy that begins with the experiences and struggles of previously excluded and oppressed groups—primarily people of color—and examines the ways multiple sectors influence their life choices and chances; (2) examination of the nature of power and its implementation in maintaining interconnected structures of inequality that affect individual and group identities and experiences; and, (3) efforts to promote social justice and social change by linking research and practice, thus creating a holistic approach to the eradication of disparities. ...Intersectional knowledge is grounded in the everyday lives of people of diverse backgrounds and is seen as an important tool that promotes social justice. The social justice agenda of the intersectional approach is key to its use in analyzing inequalities of power and privilege and it also provides a platform for uniting the different kinds of work that need to be included in the pursuit of social justice: advocacy, analysis, theorizing, and education. Because intersectional work validates the lives and stories of previously ignored groups of people, it is seen as a tool that can be used to help empower communities and the people in them. The production of this knowledge implicitly offers the potential for creating greater understanding among groups of people. (Thornton Dill, 2003. p. 1 & 3)

The ensuing sections of this article employ intersectional analysis in teasing out the relationship between culture and cultural location in the "coming out" and "being out" processes for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in higher education contexts. Through examination of the experiences of three people—one gay, one lesbian, and one bisexual—from three different racial minority communities—one Latino, one South Asian, and one African American—this relationship emerges and informs the means by which more affirming educational and workplace climates can be created for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in academia.

Defining Identity at the Intersections of Sexual Orientation and Race

The Conversants

Mark Brimhall-Vargas is an Assistant Director in the Office of Human Relations Programs, the equity compliance and diversity education arm of the Office of the President at the University of Maryland, College Park. He has been in this role for eight years. This is his first higher education employment experience. Previously, he was a Research Analyst for Fiscal Planning Services, Inc., and a Research Associate for the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials. Mark has a bachelor's degree in Government and Public Policy Analysis from Pomona College, a master's degree in Public Policy from Harvard University, and is working on a

doctoral degree in Educational Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland.

Sivagami "Siva" Subbaraman is also an Assistant Director in the Office of Human Relations Programs at the University of Maryland, College Park. She has been in this role for four years. This is her fourth higher education employment experience. Previously, she was a graduate teaching assistant in English and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and a Visiting Assistant Professor of English and Women's Studies at Drake University, Macalester College, and the University of Maryland. Siva has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Madras, two master's degrees in English, one from the University of Madras, the other from the University of Illinois, and is ABD in her doctoral degree program at the University of Illinois, which she is considering finishing at the University of Maryland.

Robert Waters is an Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs and Assistant to the President for Equity and Diversity at the University of Maryland, College Park. He has been in this role for four years. This is his third higher education employment experience. Previously, he was a Special Assistant to the President at Spelman College and at the University of San Francisco. He was also a Special Assistant to the Mayor of the City of Philadelphia. Robert has a bachelor's degree in Economics and American Studies from Eckerd College, a master's degree in Public Policy from Harvard University, and a doctoral degree in Administration and Policy Analysis from Stanford University.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity, Whiteness, and Marginalization

In this section, the conversants describe what it means to "come out" and "be out" as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color on campus in relationship to their view of outness for White gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in higher education. It is clear in this discussion that all three conversants see the coming and being out processes as somewhat more complex for people of color on campus, than for White people. Perhaps most significant here is the conversants' conclusion that because the gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity for White people is often the only or the most marginalizing experience that White people have, it becomes more of a banner identity for them than for people of color for whom racial, ethnic, linguistic, national origin, religious, and socioeconomic identities are typically far more marginalizing.

Precisely because gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color do, more often than not, experience so many more dimensions of identity marginalization than do gay, lesbian, and bisexual White people, it is clear that they risk more to come out and be out on campus than do their White counterparts. It is important to note that the conversants recognize that this is not universally the case, but generally so (Acuña, 2003; Crenshaw, 1991; Espíritu, 1992; Oboler, 1995; Weber, 2000).

Once the conversants establish this generalization, they begin to desconstruct it, problematize it, and weave into it threads of greater complexity. They wrestle with the roles they, as individuals, play in their own acceptance as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color with respect to coming and being out—how their self-esteem may influence the degree to which others affirm or disaffirm them when they disclose sexual orientation. In the context of their wrestling here, they are resolute that structural barriers to acceptance do exist—institutionalized homophobia and hetero-sexism are alive and well in the academy—and, in no way, are they trying to discount the negative experiences that out gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, regardless of race, have.

What the conversants work to get at here has more to do with how—in the context of an often hostile climate for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, especially gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color—one's personal responses to that hostility can, perhaps, produce better or worse outness experiences. It is important to note here that the ability to tailor one's response to indifference, disdain, covert and overt disaffirmation is, in and of itself, a function of privilege (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Roediger, 1999). Quite clearly, some people are able to respond "better"—more practically or in ways that will engender greater inclusion—precisely because they have had access to some form of cultural capital that enables them to recognize that if they respond differently in different situations they can often engender more positive outcomes.

The simple reality is that people with marginalized identities must direct some measure of whatever cultural capital they have toward people absent or with less marginalization in order to gain greater and more affirming entrée into mainstream arenas. People with so many marginalized identities that they lack all cultural capital for any exchange in mainstream arenas must not be pathologized for not being able to negotiate asymmetrical responses to unwelcoming workplace environments (Giroux, 1996).

> CHRISTINE: What is it about being people of color in higher education that makes coming out different than it might be for white people, or for that matter what makes it alike *and* different from what it might be for white people? What's unique about coming out as members of your racial and ethnic communities in a higher education context?
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> MARK: I think it depends on where you are in the institution. Because I think that there is almost a tale of two cities. Where if you're faculty or if your professional staff, I think that there is a level of ease because of your education, which I think protects you. And you have a skill set which the institution probably needs, so they may tolerate your presence even if they don't necessarily like it. For example, if faculty bring in a lot of money, they could probably have identities that aren't very popular, but people look the other way. As opposed to, I think, non-exempt employees[3] where tolerance for identities that are not necessarily privileged is not as great. I would actually describe higher education as very hostile for certain identities for people of who are non-exempt. So, coming out in higher education is easier than in corporate America for professional staff. But I don't that that's the case for others.
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> CHRISTINE: I have a question for you, Mark. There was a time when we had training for our office with the Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Equity and a question came up. There were a couple of people that came to talk to us and they were part of the "blue collar" staff—you know "the other side of Route 1"[4] staff. And the issue that they raised was that it was more difficult for them to be out in a working class work environment. As you recall there were some strong reactions from different people in our office about that statement, which was taken as a suggestion that working class people are more homophobic than people who are middle class or white collar. So I'm curious if you can just speak to that.
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> MARK: Yeah, that's not what I'm saying at all. What I'm saying is that I think that, for example, I would describe my own sort of lower working class experience as one of—how do I describe this—you love your kids no matter what. I'm not saying that's unique to working class people. I'm just saying that's very present. What I'm saying is that the folks in non-exempt positions are usually economically so disadvantaged already, that doing anything would jeopardize their employment—especially if you lack a lot of skill sets that make you marketable elsewhere, or mo-

bile elsewhere. Coming out is a dangerous thing to do. And arguably there are some middle-class, middle management folks who supervise non-exempt employees and who are really quite hostile to the issue of sexual orientation. So chilly climate issues that go on for non-exempt employees are also related to their supervisors. I don't think that one community is necessarily more homophobic or less homophobic than another, including that associated with socioeconomic class. In fact, my grandmother, who only had a high school education and never spoke a word of English—though not as educated on issues on sexuality—had her heart in the right place. And that was a very sort of lower working class value. The folks across Route 1 are in a desperate situation related to needing to have their jobs, because there is always someone to replace. So I think that there is a lot of caution about how people share of themselves at work. That's my observation.

ROBERT: I felt relatively in that position myself, but obviously I'm not non-exempt.

MARK: You felt relatively what?

ROBERT**:** I felt relatively vulnerable, you know. I mean I felt similarly. Not anymore, I don't think, but I don't think that feeling that your replaceable is restricted to non-exempt folks, although I have a lot more options, which is a good thing. Or I like to think I have a lot more options. And, I actually found—and it may be just my experience—that my environment got a lot better, when I got a lot better. The more my comfort level got better, just in general with myself and with who I was, the more—how do I put it—well, I didn't really care what people thought, and it made a lot that I saw different. I think part of the reason I saw the environment as hostile was because of my insecurity around my identity. And when I got more security around my identity, other people seemed to be too. When I was a lot more sure of myself, people seemed to take their cues from me in a positive way, as opposed to when they took their cues from me the other way. So I feel relatively supported now. And part of it is because I don't behave like I'm ashamed of who I am. And I don't mean to diminish what other people go through, but I think part of the reason I viewed the world as hostile is because I didn't feel good about myself.

MARK: We're co-creators of our reality.

ROBERT: When I insisted on being valued as me, then I got what I insisted on.

SIVA: Did you feel like that the acceptance came like after they got to know you as a person, so that you established certain kinds of relationships and owned certain kinds of space? Because, for me, that's how I feel. Like I feel like I couldn't put this part of my identity on first, because it felt like there were so many other things that already made me different in this society. I think much of my own experience of this is really complicated because of the fact that I'm an immigrant. And I think immigrant status has really affected what I think a coming out process is, because I have to have a job. It is hard enough getting a job being a foreigner, regardless of the fact that I have higher education degrees. So I think for many of us, the legal process of getting a green card and having, therefore, security checks and all those things, it really makes it difficult to be very visible. Even today, I'm only a green card holder, I'm not a citizen and because I do a lot of community work, I have been advised that I should become a citizen just in case this starts trouble. They would use the fact that I'm not a citizen of this country to do certain things. So I think that I just want to put that in there, because there a lots of us who are people of color who are immigrants who have a very different sense of this than people of color from here do.

ROBERT: Excuse my ignorance, but do they ask about sexual orientation in the process?

SIVA: In the green card process? Yes. You are asked to identify your sexual orientation.

ROBERT: You know maybe it's just a stereotype, but White folks can afford to be at the top of Lone Mountain [in San Francisco] waving a rainbow flag because they have the liberty to do that. And I never thought I had the liberty to do that. And even if I did, that just wasn't the way I expressed myself.

MARK: I think that that is overly simplifying the situation, though. Because, for example, I think of myself, when I was in college—in grad school—if there was a political rally or event, then I went to it. I mean that's what I did. And I was the one who would wear like the t-shirt that said "Proud Gay Person" or whatever the expression of the day was. Yet, why don't I do that now? Because by six o'clock in the evening, I'm tired. I mean that's just the way it is. And so, and I have a partner and I want to go home and dinner's on and, you know, like all the things that life sort of gives you at some point that you don't have when you were twenty years old. You were saying something about White people being able to go do this, you know wave a flag…

ROBERT: That if you don't do that, then you're not coming out the right way.

MARK: Because I think that most White gay people don't operate that way either. I think most White people want to go home and feed the dog and, I mean, I don't know if there is that level of activism and yet White people are still afforded outness status. You see what I mean, that's, I think, the operative difference. I don't think White people necessarily behave differently, I think there is something about the LGBT identity that is easier for White people to put on.

ROBERT: I don't get it.

MARK: Well, like, ok, we're discussing—what was the name of your place—you know standing on a hill? (ROBERT: Lone Mountain). I don't think most White people who we would call out on campus are people who go and wave a flag on a hill. You know what I mean? (SIVA: Yeah). And yet they obtain that out status. You know a certain director on campus is out, but he doesn't wave a flag. You know?

SIVA: To me, community activism is different from being out on campus. Like I seldom "see" myself in the LGBT community, and I *have* came out on campus. My experience as a graduate student in the early eighties is a good example of what I am talking about here. I was the first Asian woman they'd ever admitted into a Ph.D. program in the English department, there was nobody else. Nobody of color. And the first gathering I went to of lesbians, I just couldn't see myself. You see, because they all wore flannel shirts and blue jeans. I was looking at everyone else going "Aaahh" and wondering, "What am I supposed to be?" "Am I supposed to be these people?" Fortunately, by then I had had my first girlfriend and so I knew who I was. But it was just that inability for me to belong to the community, it was like, well, you have to be willing to adopt certain dress codes. (MARK: "The Uniform"). (ROBERT: Here's your flannel shirt). And even the ability to adopt certain behaviors. So, for me, I sort of feel like plaids I can live without. Today on campus this is still a hard part for me, because I feel pressured by the few White women I knew to be out. If you are not willing to put your identity out there, you're scared. I'm like, I'm not scared. I have other priorities, and I have other things that I need to get done. I'm willing to serve as a resource person for students of color, and certainly I do enough work in the community for people to know who I am. You know? I don't have time to deal with the business of not being out as cowardly.

MARK: But, I think I'm having trouble with this, because I think we're mixing conversations. Like on one level, I'm hearing "White people can do that because they face less threat than people of color" and while that's true, that's not what you are saying. You are saying "I have other priorities, and that the lesbian community wants me to fit a certain mold." So—is it threat from the majority? Is it tyranny of the small subgroup? You know, what is the rub?

ROBERT: I'm not sure—it might be both. They are never mutually exclusive.

MARK: That's why I just want to be clear that there may be a whole variety of reasons why it's more difficult for people of color. But I mean, for example, like I'm not sure that I, in my own circumstance, experience a lot tyranny related to racial context so much as people not understanding my racial background or being insensitive to the cultural context in which I grew up. So I mean, that's more how I experience it, more like people saying stupid things. Then again, I experience a lot of light skin privilege that you two clearly do not.

SIVA: Exactly my point. There were so many other stereotypes that I have to fight against, why would I present one more piece of information that encourages "them" to see me as half?

MARK: Here's the difficulty folks, I mean, not that I want to overly stereotype, but I feel like I walked into the situation—I didn't say "Oh by the way, like I'm gay and you need to hire me." But I don't think it was big secret, because I'm a personal believer that the closet door is transparent. And that people know, even if they say they don't know. People know, people know. And so even if you have not disclosed that information, it's out there anyway. And so, I guess what I'm saying is that I don't think that we are fooling as many people as we think we are. You know what I mean? "Don't ask, don't tell" exists everywhere, but I still think that is soul devouring. (SIVA: It is).

ROBERT: In what way? I mean, I hear you, but I just don't know. There is just an element of too much information sometimes. There are lots of people I wouldn't tell about lots of things in my life.

MARK: So here's the deal. If we're at work and you already have professional distance with people because they're nice people that you work with, but you really don't want to be friends with them, so let's be clear, they really don't need to know a lot about you, whatever. But that's not saying, for example, I don't have a partner. Let's say you and I have a relationship that we would describe as professionally distant, we liked each other—you're a nice person, I'm a nice person—but we're really not interested in being friends. We have our friends, we have our lives outside of work—and this is what we want. The difference is this, I would never come to you with, or in a conversation say, "Uh, Joe and I are having trouble." I would never, out of my own comfort, but clearly yours as well, bring up intimate issues. I wouldn't do that. But what if, the question was, you know—"What did you do on the weekend?"—and what I did on the weekend was, Joe and I went to go see a movie. And I said—in my mind, "I'm editing information." If I'm editing information, that arguably is not too much information, that is a level of closet that I think, ultimately, kills me.

CHRISTINE: Well you said something about denying Joe. Like denying your partner. What would that mean to you?

MARK: It minimizes that relationship. I really think it is a form of internalized homophobia, because what it is I'm saying, my relationship—I need to keep it quiet so that you are comfortable. And I think that every LGBT person at one point has to be okay with making people uncomfortable in order to fully experience the normalcy of their life. I think at some point you have to not care. "Oh you think that's too much information that I told you that my partner and I went to a movie? I don't care."

ROBERT: You're right. When I decided to come out in some sense—in whatever sense I have—is when my partner moved out here, I was like, I'm not going to hide him, so that was that. I can't hide him. So anyway, it was funny because my immediate boss spent the year before my partner came out here talking to me about getting me married. But when I finally told him, he was really supportive, I think, because he's got a gay nephew. Some other folks just give me that look like they're not that fine with it, but then that's okay too. Like I'll say something about my partner or what we did and they give me a, "I have to go to the bathroom" or "I have to run" kind of look. But then even that's not hostile. I think probably it's mostly discomfort (CHRISTINE: So who are those looks coming from?) Well, it's interesting, because they are coming from people who happen to be in more supporting roles. But I don't know whether it's because of these roles or if they just have had less exposure.

MARK: Outness is first a service to me and my partner. It's something about respecting me, my relationship, my partner that I think is essential. I think that there is also a secondary purpose and that is to serve my community. Particularly the people who are younger—who, you know—I don't want them to go through the experience that I went through. When I hear that about high schools that have like, you know, a gay or lesbian person that brings their partner/friend to prom, I'm like, "Progress." You know that was not possible when I was in high school. (SIVA: Absolutely).

SIVA: The mentoring role, I think, is huge for me, too—and changed a lot of why I started doing what I did. (CHRISTINE: So did that require you to be out in a public way?) Yeah. In a lot of ways I am out because of that. But one question I have for us is then, if we're all saying that "everybody knows" and that there are individuals at various levels that support us, then why do you think so few of us are publicly identifiable on campus? (ROBERT: Good question. Really good question). And I wonder what it is that we are doing or not doing.

CHRISTINE: Clearly that may be what makes it different for a lot of White people, especially for White men. Say for example, if that's the one non-dominant identity that you have, then coming out around that identity is going to be very different. And even for women, it may be connected to their gender identity but not much more, right. And so what you're saying is that there is more for you to unpack in some ways, because of what's centered and what is not centered (SIVA: Yeah). And so maybe that is why it takes on such an important role in the lives of the people who are used to *not* being marginalized. This is like the one experience they have where they are not in the center.

ROBERT: And it's significant and it's important and they're serious about it, but it is the only one. And they can also—well when all else fails—they can go hide in their other identities.

The Role of Multiple Identities in Challenging Assumptions about Affinity with the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity

In this portion of the dialogue, the conversants continue to describe the coming and being out processes for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in relationship to White people as a whole in higher education. Here, they come to the conclusion that not only is sexual orientation not THE defining identity for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in the way that it appears to be for many gay, lesbian, and bisexual White people—it may not even be *a* defining identity for them. Because gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color have so many social identities imbedded in their racial identities—ethnicity, language, national origin, religion, and socioeconomic class, among others—the conversants postulate that the gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity may be relegated to lesser importance,[5] or taken for granted because of, and/or simply superceded by, the greater demands of mediating these other identities.

The conversants articulate that: (1) some identities will be more salient for the individual than others; (2) which ones are deemed most salient will be different for each individual; and (3) there is no recipe for which single identity or which mix of several identities will trigger affinity, especially an easy or more fluid affinity, for the individual with a group or groups. As discussed in the previous section, an individual's personal response to the range

of marginalized group identities they hold is a function of privilege, access to cultural capital, the manner in which the unique combination of their marginalized and dominant group identities interface in order to allow and enable, or disallow and disable, them to effectively manage their responses to hostility, not only as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, but also as Latino, South Asian, African American, biracial, Pagan, Hindu, heterosexually married, immigrant, a second language speaker of English, bilingual/trilingual, working class, and so forth.

A major theme in the conversants' dialogue on group affinity had to do with assumptions that are made—by everyone (group insiders as well as outsiders)—about group affinity that are, quite often, inaccurate. In particular is the assumption that group affinity *does* exist for people of color, but does *not* exist for white people—whether gay, lesbian, and bisexual or not—on the basis of race, sexual orientation, and race *and* sexual orientation.

Said more broadly, the erroneous assumption is that affinity always and immediately exists for marginalized groups, but not for dominant groups and, further, that the more marginalized identities one shares with others, the more easy or fluid that affinity will be (Omi & Winant, 1994). What the conversants discern is that affinity does exist in some instances based only on a combination of shared identities—marginalized, dominant, or a mixture of both—and in other instances it does not.

Again, there is no recipe for the identity or mix of identities that will lead to salient affinity. And, even when such salient affinity is present, those who are engaged by it may not always be conscious of it, much less *critically* conscious of it (Einstein, 1994; Weber, 2000). Unconscious or disconscious, such affinity is more often a function of shared dominant group identities to the extent that these identities are not acknowledged or transparent. Conscious and, especially, critically conscious affinity of this nature is more often a function of shared marginalized group identities to the degree that these identities are recognized and valorized. But even under these specific conditions salient affinity doesn't necessarily emerge, and under absolute contrary ones, it can flourish (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999; Omi & Winant, 1994).

The conversants do not dismiss the importance of group identity especially for marginalized groups operating in hostile contexts, rather they help to construct a more sophisticated view of single group identity, multiple group identities, individual identity, marginalized group identity and identities, and dominant group identity and identities. In this view, privilege and oppression still operate to afford people greater and lesser access to full participation in democracy on the basis of identity group memberships, but the dynamics of privilege and oppression and their impact on individual and group access are made far more complex (Weber, 2000).

This complexity serves to augment humanity—it is a force against the dehumanization that occurs when people are reduced to demographic check boxes or railroaded into rugged individualism, neither of which act to accurately illustrate the rich diversity of the human form in all its manifestations, including the gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in higher education manifestation.

CHRISTINE: Talk a little bit about your identities. How do you define yourselves?

SIVA: I'm from South India. I'm from Tamil Nadu. I'm Hindu, specifically Brahmin, which makes a huge difference within the caste system at home—because back home I am "privileged" by caste, religion, and education. I worked as a journalist in India; I also taught in India for several years. I came from a fairly privileged background and also from a family that had several generations of education, both of men and women, which makes a difference in the ways in which my identity is constructed both here in the so-called coming out process and back home. I'm also legally married to a man and I think the status of being legally married also is important to me partly because of my being an immigrant, you know that stabilized me. I'm very uncomfortable with this whole notion of what it means to come and/or be "out." I don't even know what that means for me. Most of my family back home in India know about me and have always known about me, for many years. And I've felt very loved and cherished and I've felt, much like you Mark, that people without much education, without much Western influence, whatever, have been most supportive. But I think this sense of coming and being "out" is fickle. I find it valorized in a particularly odd way. I think that's what I've struggled with when I came to higher education, where people expected me to be—from day one—somehow out there carrying flags. Serving on all these committees and commissions and doing that kind of visible work and that, somehow, if I didn't do that, then I wasn't a card-carrying member, that I wasn't willing to be political. I wonder what you guys think about the processes of coming and being out and what your experiences are. I have felt very pressured. I have felt that White women want me to be *out in a particular way* and if I am not they put it out there that I'm homophobic or self-hating. I'm not a card-carrying member, because I'm not willing to choose. I have several identities and I'm trying very hard to juggle all these different identities as an immigrant, as a woman, as someone who didn't have a job for a while, as someone who is struggling to have a family here. I didn't have family in this country when I came, so my family became the South Asian community. For me, that has been the hardest part of this coming/being out thing. What does that mean? What does it involve? And when do you get to be seen as a card-carrying member?

MARK: I feel my academic experiences have totally shaped my ability to fully realize my social identities in a public way. I think there is something about my academic experience that has influenced my ability to come out on a variety of issues on a variety of levels. I'm originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico. I identify as a biracial person. My father is White, born in Utah, raised in Idaho. My mother is from Peru, born in Lima, raised in Lima. Then they got married and raised me in New Mexico along with my brother. I'm male. I identify as a gay male. My socioeconomic class when I was growing up was clearly lower, to lower working class. But education and having a partner have changed that dramatically, although in some ways I still think I culturally have an understanding of, and affinity with, folks that are not necessarily in my socioeconomic class now. I was born and raised a Mormon. That was a horrible, toxic experience, and so I will say loudly until my dying days. I identify now as a Pagan or Wiccan person, nature-based faith with pantheistic qualities. There's no satanic worship, that's just propaganda and stupidity. I identify with minor disability issues related to my vision and my back, but nothing that I can say is sociopolitically important.

ROBERT: I'm from Philadelphia, originally. Which probably defines a lot of who I am just because of the kind of city it is. I like to think of myself as an educator. I've spent my whole life at a school in one form or fashion. I'm African American. I think sexual orientation, probably bisexual if I was going to be specific about it. That remains to be defined. Religion… some religion, but not a lot. I don't particularly feel strongly about anybody's particular way of doing it, except I don't like too much of it imposed upon too many people. Probably, I do feel a strong sense of spirituality—I guess you could say that. And sometimes you find that in church and sometimes you don't. I'm from Philadelphia from working folks…good working folks. They've been together since they were teenagers. For better or worse. I'm the oldest boy, oldest child, oldest

grandchild, oldest cousin, oldest everything. So I'm the first-born and that probably defines a lot too.

CHRISTINE: How do your racial/ethnic communities respond to you with respect to your sexual orientations?

MARK: A connection to the Latino community has been difficult because of homophobia, and my connection to the LGBT community has been difficult because of racism. That doesn't mean, however, that I can't be out as a Latino and out as gay and have people just have to deal with it. I know that there are Latino people on campus who would love for me not to be out or not to be Latino, you know, because I complicate their vision of self. But they're just going to have to deal with it.

SIVA: But what is it to be "out" is what I was asking. What does it mean? I mean what do we have to do to be recognized as being out. Like right now, am I out? For me the process has felt more like a "coming together of my various identities rather than a coming out of a single one."

MARK: I don't know. I think it's contextual. I know that for me I arrived in higher education as an out person. I didn't put it on my résumé, but I arrived as an out person.

SIVA: What does that mean to you? Does that mean you were out to yourself?

MARK: I was out to myself. I was out to my family. People who know me knew. That was sort of it. I became an out person on campus when I put my name on the out list that was published in the paper. Prior to that, I asked to join the LGBT listserv to sort of get information about LGBT issues on campus, because I wanted to hear about them, participate, whatever. But that listserv turned out to almost reinforce the clandestine nature of LGBT identity on campus, because, you know, a lot of people only opt to do listserv because they can do it and still be in the closet. As opposed to putting your name on the out list. Right. I made a decision to put my name on the out list, because I felt it served a political purpose. So, was someone else defining my outness? Certainly. But I, at least, was complicit in that. I was like, well, I see value in putting my name to it. And so I opted to do that.

CHRISTINE: You talked before about why you think it's always better to be out than not to be out. You said that was more about a personal struggle.

MARK: As we're defining it, because remember I defined myself as an out person even before I put my name on the out list. I was out as we're complexly defining it. (SIVA: Right, so was I). But if we're not going to complexly define it then my outness on campus started when I put my name on the out list. See what I mean?

CHRISTINE: But you have said to me on several occasions something about the cost of not coming out. That there is a psychic cost to you of not being out all the time. Talk about that.

MARK: Yes. Absolutely. At least for me. When I first came to campus, I had a whole year of employment before the opportunity to put my name on the out list came about, because I came in November and the out list happens in October. During that year, I was always coming out to people because I cannot tolerate not being myself, and being myself requires me to be out. There is just something that for me is soul devouring about not being out. I'm not saying go out hang signs and all that stuff. But if you're going to have to come in to work on Monday and someone says "How was your weekend?" and you edit information to preserve the heterosexual status quo, then that destroys your integrity. I cannot do that. I will not do that. I'd rather be fired. I'd leave. I don't want to be in an environment that requires me to do that. And that's a choice that I've made. And yes, that's related to some of the privileges I have. Absolutely. I have an education that will probably allow me to go elsewhere. I have a male privilege, I have light skin privilege, I have a variety of things (ROBERT: And you made a choice about where to work where you think that will be supported). Clearly. That's also the case.

SIVA: Yeah, see, if I didn't work in our office, in fact when I worked in the English department earlier, twelve years ago, I was the only Asian woman in the department. And, see this is where I'm having trouble, because I feel that there are so many multiple parts of my identity that I want to be able to bring into this conversation. I want to be able to bring in the fact that I'm Indian, that I'm Tamilian, that I'm all of these things, apart from the fact that I'm gay, but also, at the same time, I want to be able to say that I'm married and I'm gay. I want to be able to say all those things in the same breath and I can't because of course, everyone's going "Aaahhaahhaahh…what? Who? Where? Huh? How?" And, of course, the immediate question is, "Is it a marriage of convenience?" or it's assumed that my partner is a gay man and neither of these things is true. And so, I do edit out a lot of information. (MARK: That's work, maybe you can do it, but I can't do it. That's something I don't want to do). No, no, no. My thing is, there are lots of things about myself that I may choose to edit out, and I understand this whole issue around, you know, if you can't be yourself, you are psychologically damaging yourself—true—I accept that. But I think, "Am I likely to come and tell people wherever I work that I am doing a major sort of religious ritual of some sort that I think is not going to be accepted or supported or remotely understood? Say I do, I don't, but say I do satanic rituals over the weekend… When I worked in the mall, for example, at the coffee shop, I *never* found a way to bring my sexual identity up, I couldn't even imagine doing so. It was hard enough for me to mention that fact that I had a graduate degree, let alone this aspect of my identity. But in higher education, I find a lot of hypocrisy around this. You know there is an expectation that you be out, but the acceptance of outness is only superficial, I believe that's why there are so few people of color out on campus.

ROBERT: But there are not that many people out in general on campus. I don't think the penalty for being out is as high in higher education as it is in other places.

CHRISTINE: How was your coming out? How do you define your coming out process in higher education and/or in general in relationship to being Black or African American?

ROBERT: I don't know. I have distinctly different experience because my coming out process kind of started in San Francisco, and I started out in San Francisco married to a woman. So that was my identity to everybody. Part of my whole experience in San Francisco was moving from that identity to another identity. So then when I came here, I didn't have the married or the transformative identity. I worried about coming out here because of the job I was in, because of who I was working with. I didn't trust anybody enough to be out when I first got here. It kind of turned out I had pretty good reason not to trust the people I was working with, but that had nothing to do with my sexuality. As time went by, I found what the African American community was really like. Before then, I had a *perception* of what the African American community was like—a somewhat erroneous perception—and that was another reason I wasn't going to come out because I thought, "I'm not going to get any support from these folks here." And actually, I've gotten better support, well, some support, from the community. I didn't think I would get any. (CHRISTINE: From the community or from individuals?). I can make a distinction so I'd say from individuals. Because, I still don't know about the community. And part of it goes back to what you were saying, Mark. I mean, my sexual identity was pretty transparent all along…I think they were waiting for me as much as I was waiting for them.

CHRISTINE: You said something about how, in some instances, in minority communities, but particularly in the African American community, it's almost like you can be gay or you can be lesbian, as long as you don't name it for the community; the community is fine knowing it, but the

minute you start talking about it, then there is a problem. Do you experience that?

ROBERT: I can't say because I haven't been pushing it with "the community." With individuals, I've had a better response than I thought I would. I don't know about the community, that's a good question. It will be interesting to see. I mean, hell, you know I've had to learn people can have lots of resentments I don't even know about. And I've learned not to care. I mean I used to care more about that. Lots of times people are going to be disgusted and not ever say anything to me or say anything to anybody. So you know, you never know what people are thinking exactly.

MARK: Absolutely. People have asked me how I've experienced the Latino community on campus. That's almost a fictitious question. It's not answerable. Because there *isn't* a Latino community on campus. There are Latino people I know who have been supportive. But I'm not sure that, like, three or four people are a community—you know? I will say that the students have always had a sort of respectable distance—I guess that is the only way to describe it. I don't know what to do about that. I've made the effort to connect in the past, but I don't really make that effort anymore, because I don't find that it gets rewarded with reciprocal effort back. So, that's where I am.

SIVA: I would say there is no single South Asian community on campus either. Partly because there are those who are immigrants coming to go to graduate school here, and then there are the second generationers who are growing up here. And interestingly for me, I used to think that it would be easier for me to find community acceptance with the second generationers, but actually that has turned out to not be true. I belong to several South Asian listservs (the South Asian community is primarily a cyber community), and they have all been organized by immigrants, by the immigrant generation, not the second generation. I have thought about it for a long time as to why the second generation does not get involved in the community, and it's because they have family here. Those of us who are immigrants are involved in the community, especially the cyber community, because our families are not here. So we are able to be more free about our LGBT identities here, because we are so far away from home that it's not likely that people at home will ever find out about it. So we are more free to be gay and lesbian, to be out in organizing and building community, whereas the second generation, most of them are very scared, very nervous about being out. This is because of the homophobia in the community, as in all other communities. While the separation from family has actually made a difference for me off campus, the difficulties being out on campus are related to my having nieces and nephews that go to school here, who don't know about me. So in the community context I function as an immigrant and am freer to be out because of distance from family, but on campus I am situated more like a second generationer with family in closer proximity which limits my expression… so, in some way I don't have anybody. If something happens to me, who will catch me when I fall? The don't ask, don't tell policy serves a purpose for me with my family on campus. If they know, they don't ask and that allows them to be there for me and for me to have them there to some extent. To the rest of the extent, I get support from the cyber community contexts. I feel like I'm always in the process of coming out, which is why I find it a very draining process. It's endless—there is never an end to this process of being out. It's like I'm coming out all the time, in various ways, on various levels, to various people who, most of the time just refuse to get it or to deal with me about it.

MARK: I have the opposite experience. I find that, because I feel so incredibly atomized in terms of my identity on campus, I have nothing to lose. I'm serious. I'm serious. I've got no one to alienate, because I don't feel very strongly connected to a community at all. And so, if Latino people don't like me, I really don't care. If LGBT people don't like me, I really don't care, because I just don't feel that connected. I mean in terms in all the cross-sections of my identity, I just don't feel like I'm reflected in higher education in any real way.

CHRISTINE: What if you were at an Hispanic-serving institution or in the Southwest, do you think these would impact you differently?

MARK: I think that I would appreciate both because then I *would* have a tangible Latino identity to reflect on and think about. I don't feel like I have that here. If I want to be Latino on campus, I have to work so hard to even find someone to do that with—you know what I mean? It's very hard. (SIVA: That would be true for me too). Whenever I encounter Carolina R.-B. I speak to her in Spanish, because it's so rare, oh my gosh. So that sense of being very atomized and sort of singular is, I think, precisely what frees me to do what I do, because I don't have an expectation that people are going to like me, appreciate me, want to hang out with me, approve of me, want to consider me for X job. I don't have those expectations at all. I don't have an expectation of advancing, frankly, any further than I am now. My honest sense is that, if I do, that's great, but I don't have an expectation that higher education really wants someone like me. I'm clear about that. That's not a boohoo statement. I'm just saying I think that in higher education people are really cliquish, and I'm not a part of the clique. (SIVA: I feel that way too).

SIVA: What I'm doing out of our office at this point is great. But I feel like, "Where will I go?" There is nowhere to go. What are they going to do with me anywhere else? I can't see myself working anywhere, in any other unit, at any higher level. It's not my identity. (CHRISTINE: Is it an aggregate of your identities?) No. No part of my identity is validated. For example, even today at the ethnic minorities' awards ceremony, I was, again, the only one in ethnic dress. It's funny isn't it, because here we are on a very demographically diverse campus and, yet, I'm the only one. I don't find very many like-minded people with whom to connect. I meet people who are very liberal, quote unquote, and they want me to fit in this liberal box that I don't necessarily fit into. It's like everybody lives in these little boxes.

MARK: To fight those boxes, one thing that I do is to defy the overwhelming pressure to fit a mold that would make people more comfortable with me. Like I know that people would love it if I never wore boots and a bolo tie again. I know that my previous supervisor would have loved for me to have been like Mr. GQ, cut my hair, don't look so Latino, don't talk that way, don't wear that kind of outfit. I mean everything about me was wrong for campus life. But that's how I grew up. This is who I am. This *is* formal wear in the Southwest. I *am* appropriately dressed, dammit.

CHRISTINE: So, Siva, do you see Mark as a Person of Color who is gay and who wears ethnic dress? And if you do, does that make you feel connected to him?

SIVA: For me, no. I think because of his gender. (CHRISTINE: Gender. So for you it's more about being with women?) With gay men I think I do have trouble.

CHRISTINE: What about with some of the more visible White lesbians on campus?

SIVA: The Whiteness interfered hugely. Also the privilege interfered hugely. I don't feel supported by them at all maybe because I've been married and my husband works on campus, which has also complicated my coming out. He's a professor. It's kind of awkward for us in our interactions with others, because we are both on campus. (ROBERT: Are you officially "out married?") We are separated now, but we are still legally married. Plus, the separation is still very recent and only after twenty years of marriage. We're not divorced, we are not legally divorced. For him, it's really hard, because his department is not the most open place, you know, for anything. For most people there, we are a married couple. So even if anybody has questions about me, which

I'm sure by now they do, it just goes round and round. Just the other day when I was socializing with some people his department, it was clear that they've sort of "heard" about me. (ROBERT: Like something is going on). Of course no one will ask me or say anything to my husband. And, you know, he doesn't talk about it, he will answer the question if he's asked, but he is not going to say anything if no one asks. (CHRISTINE: Is there a sense of pity around him?) Oh, enormous. Oh, poor guy, you know he's emasculated. So I think that's made things very hard for us on campus. Which is somewhat understandable I suppose. But I'm trying to still wrestle with why I don't feel supported by the White women that I know. (CHRISTINE: Or men of color who are gay?) Or men of color period. Maybe because I don't have a chance to ever interact with them in any fashion other than around work. I feel my politics and political world is not on campus, it's in D.C. where I'm really known and people know who and what I am. They all know, you know. They have trouble negotiating my identities, but at least they know what they are. In general, I feel isolated anywhere on campus.

CHRISTINE: How about you? Do you feel a sense of affinity with other people of color who are also gay or lesbian?

ROBERT: I do, but I guess I'm not that sophisticated in general about stuff. (CHRISTINE: That's just an act that you put on). No, no. I mean around this I just feel better knowing that somebody else is there. And that's not very sophisticated. It's kind of a more visceral thing than an intellectual thing. I just feel better knowing that when I see you, Mark, or you, Siva, that you are here.

SIVA: I think maybe generally knowing people on campus has been great. I mean, I feel connected to a lot of people and I know a lot of people now who are very accepting of who I am, whether they know about all my identities or not. But then, I feel a lot of them may be disturbed by the fact that I do certain kinds of political work even more so than by my sexual identity. So it's not very clear to me what will disturb people more, my radical politics or my sexual identity. But see, I've not still made any connections to the Asian identity, even if that identity is the larger Asian identity, as opposed to the South Asian or Indian identity. I don't know if it's because I'm not in a faculty role. I wonder if that has anything to do with it.

CHRISTINE: What about being in our office? Like I know Mark has said several times that he's very happy that you, another out LGBT person, is in the office, because he was the token *one* for so long. As a result, a lot of the work that people in the office did around the LGBT issue is because of him as a person, an individual. If he was a less accessible, less likeable, a less kind person, would the office have come as far as it has on this issue? That is, something about the way he expresses himself *and his gayness* made it easier for people who didn't have a lot of experience with LGBT issues to kind of embrace them, because they could embrace him. So if he was a "different kind of gay person," would people have done the same kind of work around this issue? Even though he's very generous and very giving to have helped move the office along in this way, he has expressed still feeling very much like a token. So having you come, regardless of whether or not you're friends or if you get along is less important than just knowing there is another person there.

SIVA: Yeah, I suppose it is true that within the context of our office. Certainly, I don't think I would have been as open if it hadn't been for his presence. That would be true. In some way I felt like, okay he's there and he's out and it's not an issue in this office, so then it's going to be okay for me, too.

CHRISTINE: The question that I put out was, "Do you all feel an affinity with each other?" Siva said no, and Robert said yes. Mark?

MARK: I do. I feel a lot of affinity to Robert, even if I don't work directly with him, because we share so many experiences. And that's been awesome, you know. I think part of it with Siva is that I don't—well, I'll just put this out there—I feel like I have made efforts to reach out to you, but that you have not been interested. I mean, I know I've invited you out to lunch and a lot of times you've said no, and so I haven't made a big issue of it. I haven't investigated the reasons for that. But when you were first hired, I did think that we would have more of a relationship because of the identities that we share. But that turned out to be wrong. And that hasn't been the first instance of this in the office. I thought I would have more connection to Mark L. or Roger C. based on Latino identity, and that clearly has not happened either. So in some ways, these experiences reinforce my sense of atomization, because I feel like we've gone out of our way to create a sense of community in the office, but the more different identities we get, the less community we seem to have.

CHRISTINE: That there is so much diversity that there is almost no community? Like, there is just so much diversity that people take it for granted and, thus, the need for a kind of really close connected community becomes less important?

SIVA: Well, like I was telling you, Christine, coming out in the office for me was definitely made easier because of your presence, Mark. I don't think I would have dared actually if I hadn't known about you. You made it a fairly hospitable climate. I knew I wouldn't have to worry about my job. But in terms of affinity, yeah I guess don't feel that much affinity with gay men for whatever the reason. It *is* a gender thing. Which is not true, necessarily, for a lot of South Asian dykes who tend to hang onto South Asian men—gay men—a lot. I think where I do have an affinity with you, Mark, is more in the intellectual realm, not across sexual identity. (MARK: We have a kind of technological affinity?) Yeah. But I feel more of an intellectual affinity with things you're into, the kinds of things you read, and the kinds of things you think about. I wonder what would create affinity with me with other people of color around this LGBT identity. I don't know actually. **(**CHRISTINE: Men and women or just men?) Men and women. I think that affinity will not happen without the negotiation of these other pieces of our identities. For example, I know so much about African American culture, history, and literature, but the reverse is not true. Typically, African Americans know very little about India. **(**ROBERT: We weren't taught, so we have to learn). Most of the African Americans I know—even my close friends—are like, "Aaahh Siva." You know, they are like very average Americans in terms of what they know about India or Indians or Indian culture or Indian languages. (ROBERT: Next to nothing probably). I chose to study African American culture, history, and literature, so I know a lot about it, so I feel comfortable with African Americans, but they are not comfortable with me, because they don't know much about me. Though I feel Mark knows a lot more about my culture than most other Latinos, I know he still doesn't know that much and maybe that's why the affinity doesn't just happen. Just because you're gay, I'm not able to connect. I feel that's a myth.

MARK: But after all that, the connections that I have made on campus, outside of the few people in our office that I really connect with, have been Latina women who are staff people. And I have to say those are treasured connections. When Carolina R.-B. came to campus, I was like, "Oh my God," I felt like I was finally breathing clean air. And it wasn't just the experience of our being Latino in the United States. It was that she was also South American, she understood South American culture. She totally got what I was talking about, and I loved that. And she said to me a similar statement—that I was the only person who knew that it was not strange for people in South America to be trilingual. It's a very common experience with Peruvian people to be very fluent in English, Spanish, and an indigenous language.

CHRISTINE: I'm listening to you three talk, and I'm wondering if the affinities—LGBT, people of color, and LGBT people of color—come more easily when the dominant cultural context is hostile? When it's aggressively heterosexist and homophobic, does that make the LGBT affinity more fluid? When it's overtly racist, does that make the connections between and among people of color more immediate? (SIVA: Yeah, at least a little bit).

MARK: In that moment, yes. If there was something that happened that was profoundly racist against Latinos, I'm sure Mark L. and Roger C. and I would do whatever to come together. Absent that moment or after that moment passes, no. For example, there was a Latino Town Hall Meeting that was organized by Mark L. and, yet, he didn't even invite Roger C. or me to go to it. Both Roger C. and I found out it was happening through other means. Arguably, we should be there. Mark L. should have invited us, we should have been participating in the preparation of it. We should have. (CHRISTINE: So why didn't that happen?)

SIVA: Because, I think, of that presumption of affinity

CHRISTINE: But what I'm hearing from Mark is that there is a sadness that it doesn't exist. (MARK: Yes).

SIVA: But I think that affinity doesn't happen immediately, because there are so many other levels to understanding your own identity, depending developmentally where you are and how much each piece of your identity intersects with the next.

CHRISTINE: But clearly there are people within communities that do have immediate affinity. For example, White sorority girls. There is this immediate assumption that they have so much in common. And I always say to them, "If you sit down and talk to each other, do you find that assumption to be accurate?" There was a line in one of their papers about how the four—yes, four—Black women that are in the predominantly White sororities on campus right now must have a difficult time fitting into the sorority girl "uniform" in the same way we could describe a gay "uniform." The paper commented that the sorority girl uniform is one that, in and of itself, is raced (and classed). And so my marginalia back was, "Are you assuming that this uniform fits all White sorority girls easily?" That is, is there imbedded in the sorority girl affinity a willingness not only to try on the uniform, but to force it to fit, no matter what, because of a desire to be a part of the group? Is there a forced shared identity among women who simply don't immediately identify the differences between them? Is there a whittling down of difference? For example, is difference being atomized when these White sorority girls say, "I didn't want to join a sorority where everybody was blonde and blue eyed, because I'm brunette," or, "I didn't feel comfortable joining a sorority where there weren't other Catholics?" How much affinity does there have to be for affinity not to an illusion for everyone? And if it is an illusion for everyone, then how do we define community, culture, identity?

ROBERT: Sometimes affinity transcends atomization. I think there is a paramilitary affinity that transcends, in my view, race. The kind of people who seem to be interested in joining the police department or military, regardless of what they look like or what their gender is, there is something that just lands them in these contexts.

CHRISTINE: And yet it doesn't protect Black men when they're off duty or out of uniform. Like Mike M. has said, "I might be safer than the average Black man *if* I can get to my badge in time.

ROBERT: But their affinity would be on the other side, unfortunately. I mean they'd all be just as likely to kill some poor Black kid because their affinity is as cops as opposed as African Americans, etc.

CHRISTINE: But wouldn't the larger context of race still make them "the other" when they are out of uniform, to be sure, but even in some cases when they *are* in uniform?

MARK: Yes.

SIVA: Ok, let me ask a question of you, Christine. Would you automatically feel affinity with other White people because you are White?

CHRISTINE: In certain contexts, yes. Definitely. For example, there are times when being around other White people (especially those who share certain interaction norms and a political world view with me) is a relief. Absolutely. Precisely because of what having this in common translates into, namely a level of effort that I *don't* have to put forth to engage.

SIVA: So if I am with other South Asians there would, automatically, be certain kinds of affinity, right? That's the presumption of affinity I'm trying to get at. But there are so many variables amongst us—of which sexual identity is only one—that I'm not sure that that part of my identity will necessarily, immediately create affinity with either Mark or Robert. Did I feel immediate affinity with Mark because he was gay? Yes and no. Because there is also the fact that he's a man, the fact that he's Latino, all of those things made enough differences that the gay part of his identity, even though I have some identification with it—isn't enough to produce affinity for me.

CHRISTINE: How complexly you all contextualize your identities I find reaffirming. Because even as a White, more or less heterosexual, I have multiple identities as well, and it's because of those multiple identities that I, too, often find it hard to find affinity with one kind of person. I have to move within different identities and find different kinds of affinities constantly. (MARK: Yeah, be flexible).

SIVA: That's what makes it hard to build community. Because community, more often than not, means single identity community.

CHRISTINE: So, then, is group identity real? Or is it only real when it's aggregated to the broader categories? Many of my White students ask why we can't just focus on the individual. Why we have to focus on groups. Why it has to be about race and gender, and socioeconomic class, and national origin... And, in some ways, our conversation could be interpreted to answer these questions in an uncritically conscious way.

ROBERT: I have a story that I think will reframe your point, Christine. I love this story. I was in Tijuana. Remember how starkly horrible Tijuana is. I was standing with my friends and there was this White woman standing next to us and she looked at me and said, "Oh, I'm so happy. I'm so happy to see you. I'm so happy to see somebody else *White*." Clearly, what she meant was that she was so happy to see another "American." So, I joked with her about this. It's funny to me how she found this affinity so automatically. She was so clearly happy to see me because Tijuana is really just so overwhelming, it wasn't a bit contrived.

CHRISTINE: For me I experienced that affinity through language. Being in a second-language environment for a long period of time can be really exhausting. (SIVA: Yeah, it is). Just to be able to retreat with other native English speakers, even for an hour, in order to not have to think about how I express myself or talk was a huge relief when I lived outside the U.S.

MARK: I find that I retreat in different communities. There are times when Carolina and I *have* to go speak Spanish, again, even if it's only for an hour. But that doesn't solve all my needs. Then I need, every so often, to not see straight people anywhere in my line of sight. At other times still, I don't want to see anyone but gay men in my line of sight. What I need changes, depending on how what I feel has been fed and what hasn't.

CHRISTINE: I think in San Francisco that happens more effortlessly, because there is so much rich diversity that almost anyone who lives in these borderlands—border communities—that we are describing can move easily from one affinity to another. That's harder to do in other parts of the country. And while higher educa-

tion is, perhaps, more flexible in this regard than other employment contexts, there is still work to be done.

Off-Campus Life and the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity for People for Color

More briefly, in this portion of the dialogue, the conversants discuss possible explanations for why gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color are less visible in higher education. The conversants agreed that as people of color, they are less likely to expect affirmation in the mainstream workplace setting—higher education being one such setting—because they have not, historically speaking, received that affirmation on the basis of race, nor on the related bases of ethnicity, language, nationality, religion, or socioeconomic class (Omi & Winant, 1994; Weber, 2000).

Thus, they are conditioned to look to off-campus settings for this affirmation, and this conditioning carries over to affirmation sought on the basis of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities. Because gay, lesbian, and bisexual White people are, as White people, used to receiving affirmation in the mainstream workplace setting—inclusive of higher education—they are more likely to push for compensatory affirmation of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities while at work (Roediger, 1999).

CHRISTINE: The question that I want to ask has to do with choosing one identity over the other. Your sexual identity or your racial or ethnic identity and how do you negotiate that. Where is the space for you to be both, or even more things than these two?

SIVA: There isn't such a space.

MARK: No, there isn't.

SIVA: For me, I sometimes feel that within the off-campus South Asian community, I would feel most at home, but then within a lot of the South Asian LGBT communities, many of them are not political the way that I am political about sexual identity. To them it's just freedom to fuck who they want to fuck. That's all. I mean, they have no sense of political consciousness, partly because they don't feel like they belong to this country yet. You know, for many of them, they don't feel citizenship either in the sense of general citizenship or simply in terms of community. So of course, they don't want to participate in any of the political or community things that are important to me. So I don't necessarily feel at home there either. I don't know. I still search for this mysterious place where I can be all of these things that I am.

MARK: I think there is also something about reliance on off-campus community. Because, for example, even among these Latina women who I dearly cherish on campus, I still feel that there is an element, for example, my religious identity, that I cannot connect to these women on. Or, for that matter, with a lot of other people on campus. And—I'm still ok with that. Whereas someone else might say, "Oh I just can't be out, because I need Latinos to be on my side in campus life," I don't necessarily feel that, because I feel I have achieved my safety, security off campus. So I actually think there is something about routing my identity in terms of my safety off campus, that enables me to be out or do whatever on campus. It doesn't make me overly reliant on needing an on-campus community in a way that I have to say if I was an immigrant coming to campus, maybe I would much more strongly feel the need for.

CHRISTINE: Or if you didn't have a partner that made your economic situation more stable? (MARK: You bet).

SIVA: Or having a partner in the first place. I don't have a partner. No, I have a male partner. But in terms of my—how do I say this—I think having not been in a long-term lesbian relationship with somebody that has been open, I was in one but it was very closeted, but being in one that was open is a very different experience and a very empowering experience and a very validating experience. And having not had that, I think it makes it very difficult then to feel that this is something wonderful to be. You know, when I see—for example—the few times that I have seen Mark and Joe together—I always wonder—oh my, what would it be like to actually have this and actually walk into my office with my partner and not feel weird. But I don't know that, and I think because of this I do draw much of my strength now from off campus, not on campus. And I think that's what has also allowed me to more and more and more say I don't care about what people think. I will do what I have to do on campus and then go.

MARK: Isn't that a sad statement, though. I hate to say it. That the reason I can be out on campus is because I have very little investment. I have very little affectional relations with campus life as a whole. That's why I can do it. You know, it's funny, when you were even thinking about doing this interview, I did not think that it was going to come out of my mouth, yet, as I've been sitting here, as I've really been processing and thinking—what makes it possible to be out easily is the lack of campus connection—unfortunately. That is true.

CHRISTINE: That reminds me of a conversation where people who were really into the deconstruction of language used to talk how the term lesbian comes from the Isle of Lesbos and that no woman of color would ever define herself as an island because of the need to connect to a mainland or a community. As this critique goes, only White women enjoy the island context. And, yet, it sounds like what you are saying is that what makes it possible for all people—including, maybe even especially, immigrant women of color—to be out is their ability to function as islands.

SIVA: To an extent, yes, that is what I am saying. It is true that part of the reason it becomes okay to "come out" is because you can say—yeah, screw it—if they don't like me, I don't care. But there are others on my island off-campus; so many others who love me and cherish me and nurture me for who I am, that I can do without co-habitants on my on-campus island.

MARK: This isn't really a statement about our office, in particular. I feel supported there. I do. But, I don't feel like everyone wants to connect to me personally. I don't feel overt hostility, but I really don't feel a lot of warmth either.

CHRISTINE: Well, I was going to say that, like I really enjoy you, Siva, intellectually, personally, but I also get the message that if you have a choice about where to spend your time outside of work, it's going to be with an off-campus cohort of yours.

SIVA: I hang out with a lot of different kinds of groups of people depending on the political work I'm involved in. But I think, I mean, I don't know what it is about campus life, in particular, that creates that sort of atomization of identity that Mark talked about earlier—but I feel that.

MARK: Outness on campus is something that just happens, because I get nurturing elsewhere.

SIVA: I don't know if I agree. It's sort of an assumption that a lot of dykes make that if I'm South Asian and I'm dyke, I'm going to have affinity with another South Asian dyke. And then they realize—no. There are certain need differences, you know. There are too many different variations even within lesbians from India, because you know you can be from different regions of India and many regions are like foreign countries to me. So there is very little commonality of culture, religion, language—anything actually. But you know there is this sort of expectation or presumption of affinity based on certain sort of common cultural things. And so, this issue comes up a lot within our community—even in the one Indian person I dated, she was from a very different part of India, you know, we had no language in common except English. I didn't know much about her—she was from the north. But it was this assumption of presumption of affinity. Then we realized that we were about poles apart as could be, because we didn't share any

political things in common, we shared very little life style stuff in common, we shared little core values in common. I had more in common with my White woman friend, Laura, who I've known for fifteen years. So I think the question you are raising is interesting to me—what is it that we think affinity is about? You know? Do we really have a deeper level of connection and understanding and acceptance of each other because of shared identities? Because then the immediate affinity I should have becomes because she is gay and I'm gay. (CHRISTINE: That was the question—do you have an affinity because of that?). No, but see that affinity assumes that there is a simple understanding of gayness that will immediately make it possible for me to find common ground with someone because they are gay. Just as Mark said, just because he is Latino and Roger is Latino he thought there would be some kind of affinity between them, but there isn't—because if you have any remotely complex understanding of these identities then you begin to realize that cannot have common ground. I'm saying affinity seems to be more like you have to be boxed to have immediate affinity of some sort. I don't know. I mean, am I making sense?

ROBERT: Yes, you are. I think that's exactly why people are not out on campus. God knows what they are doing off campus. I think Black folks for instance—well, at in least my experience—many Black folks on campus have a Blacker identity off campus. Whatever their identity is on campus, they have a *Black* identity off campus.

SIVA: But that Black identity, even when it is packaged in Lesbian dressing, can marginalize me off campus. For example, when I go to Baltimore to the only women of color lesbian bar, which is predominantly African American, within the people of color group there is that presumption of affinity again. But, more often than not, the presumption is based on mutual misunderstanding and stereotyping. So the other day when I went there, I was wearing a salwar, because I was absolutely fed up, so I just said to myself I'm going to wear what I want, and a Black woman came up to me and said, "Oh, I think you look so exotic," and I'm like, "Aaahh, I'm gone."

ROBERT: But don't White people stereotype you too? (SIVA: Yeah). I mean, even within your own community, I mean I'll go out to African American bars in D.C. and you'll go in and it means a certain thing to be a Black gay man. It doesn't help to be independent.

MARK: I think that there is a sense of indifference about the LGBT campus community and I think it has, in large part, to do with this sort of strange, you know, you build, maybe some friendships with people in your office and then you go to your home culture. Like there isn't, I don't feel, a heavy sense of investment in people's identity or nurturing or socializing with the campus. I just don't.

ROBERT: I think people just get their nourishment in other places.

SIVA: I think that's generally true of campus life. Even ten years ago, I felt that. You know—nobody hangs around campus. Everybody just gears their social life and political life in D.C. or in Baltimore. But I am wondering, also, if it is because people of color feel it's artificial to valorize the LGBT aspect of their identities at the expense of all others. Maybe that's why people are not invested in being out on campus, because they feel that there are so many other things to be invested in both on campus and off.

White Hegemony and the Limited Expression of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity on Campus

In this concluding piece of their dialogue, the conversants touch on the ways in which gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color are, in fact, out on campus, but how because of how "out" is socially constructed by gay, lesbian, and bisexual White people to look certain ways and to mean certain things, their outness is not acknowledged or legitimated as, in fact, outness. Here the conversants challenge the ways in which Whiteness mediates the expression of outness on campus as limiting of not only gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color, but also gay, lesbian, and bisexual White people. The narrow physical characteristics, attire, gender roles, social activities, family configurations and relationships, and definition of LGBT political engagement that are deemed the "authentic" attributes of outness reduce the entire LGBT community to a homophobic and heterosexist stereotype (King, 2004: Naples, 1998; Weber, 2000).

When gay, lesbian, and bisexual White people deliberately or inadvertently police adherence to these attributes, they effectively imprison gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color's expression of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities. The expectation that gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity be singularly expressed—as AN identity—as opposed to multiply expressed—as identitIES—limits it being expressed at all, as well as the way in which that expression is made manifest (Giroux, 1996).

Here it is clear, as the conversants point out, that racial climate impacts sexual orientation climate on campus. And, as they discuss, a major factor in improving racial climate is increased demographic diversity (Milem, 2000). Thus, it stands to reason that with greater numbers of people of color on campus, there will also be greater numbers of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color on campus, the impact of both of which will be to break down the racialized expectations for how identities—racial and sexual orientation-based—may be expressed. Sheer numbers make coming out and being out as people of color and as gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in higher education a far easier proposition.

CHRISTINE: I have a question about higher education in general. Have any of you ever been on campuses where it's been easy to be out?

SIVA: Actually for me, the easiest was at Macalester. Small, private, pretty much White. Where I didn't have to say anything. Everybody said, "Oh yeah, she's a dyke." And I was there for a very short time, but you know everybody knew. It was easy for me, nobody cared, it seemed. Some of the ease was because it was kind of trendy, you know. For the kids, it was trendy. But there, more of the faculty were out, and there were certainly more women of color who were out in all roles. So it's so interesting to me that it was easier for me to be myself on a small, White, liberal arts campus in the Midwest. Minneapolis is, I think, very different than what it's trumped up to be. I think it's very progressive. It is. The surrounding community there is not very segregated so everybody [all the lesbians] belonged to one group. And that helped, because that's where I met a lot more women of color from other groups—from other racial and ethnic groups. Whereas elsewhere, it's been very segregated. In the city here, you know African Americans are by themselves, Latinas are by themselves, Asians are by themselves, South Asians are by themselves—you know the groups are fairly segregated. At least that has been my experience.

MARK: My undergraduate school was small, the faculty was almost exclusively White, but also very comfortable being out and openly said so—they didn't feel any issue about that. There were a lot of out staff people, even out deans at my undergraduate college were not a big deal. (CHRISTINE: And yet, wasn't that a hostile place for you as an undergraduate?) I found it much more hostile around my racial identity than my sexual identity. Though it was hostile around my sexual identity, I felt it was hard to be an out gay student, it was harder to be an out student of color—you know, that was a much more difficult thing than sexuality alone. I felt that there was a dramatic difference between the experience of fac-

ulty and staff and students there. And when I went to Harvard, it was the reverse. I felt that students were very easily out and the faculty were hush-hush.

ROBERT: At University of San Francisco, we had some folks who were known, because they were in certain departments. And then you had some gay men, who because of age, being out wasn't a concern. I mean, it's a Catholic school, but in general, everybody could be out. It was very easy for White folks, not as easy, but still relatively easy for people of color—if you're going to be out anywhere, San Francisco is the place, Catholic school or not. Just the sheer volume of out people just makes it easier—even in private companies, even in city government. Wherever you are in San Francisco—most places—you can come out. That didn't necessarily mean your life was happy and free, but you could be out. You might get some grief, but the volume of out people makes it very different, I think.

SIVA: Does a campus racial climate affect the way the way we are looking at the LGBT issue? For me the scariest experience has to do with the conservative South Asians that I know on campus. A lot of them are Hindu fundamentalists, even though they are much younger, like twenty years younger than me, I get death threats from them, because of the kind of activism I'm doing, even beyond the South Asian community activism. They actually sent a threat to me in a letter to our campus president in response to a forum I was organizing at the university. So the campus racial community for me is quite politically conservative, religiously conservative, and therefore hostile. With this group of people, anything I do—even simply coming out myself—makes my life difficult. So I feel that, you know, there is no place at all for me to completely out as anything on campus—I am even scared to be out as a secular Hindu.

CHRISTINE: You made me think of the circumstances under which you made a decision to come out.

SIVA: Yeah. When that girl got beat up. (ROBERT: Oh, that's right). I began to meet more and more young women who are struggling with these sexual identity issues, and I wanted to be there for them and be able to talk to them about my own struggles around the same issues. That is the most important thing I can do, to tell them, "Yes, you can be." There is one person right now who I'm sort of mentoring. She is twenty-five years old. She's from Pakistan. She is struggling with her list of identities: being Pakistani, being in this country, being alienated, etc. There is a "lateness" in coming out for me that has to do with the fact that it took me many years just to move from seeing myself as a foreigner/immigrant to seeing myself as Third World, to seeing myself as a woman of color, and so on. You know that national, religious, racial, ethnic, and gender identity development process took such a long time that I think it made the sexual identity development process even more delayed. And I think that would be true for many immigrants here. But then there are the people who are growing up here, many of them are in their early twenties, you know. And I look at them and I think, "Wow," you know, I couldn't imagine being where they are. I think that the confusions and related pressure points are still there, with family in particular—you know, the rejection (and some of them have been completely rejected by their family and have completely lost their families). But they use the LGBT community to work through these confusions and to become their family. This is where they run into the most trouble, because when you are looking for the LGBT community to be your major support and it's predominantly White, you don't feel at home there either—so where do you go?

ROBERT: I cannot imagine dealing with these things when I was that age, I didn't even think about then. If I did think about them, I could not imagine how I might have wanted my life to be and even if that was possible, and I don't want our students to ever think that they can't live their lives however they want to live their lives. If I can help them with that, then I can't be ashamed, or I'll be damned. I don't ever want them to worry about what I had to worry about.

SIVA: You made me think about the question Mark raised earlier, the question of, at some point, having to be okay with making other people uncomfortable in order to affirm oneself—this is an interesting question to me. In the context of higher education, generally more people are more aware, let's say, that we exist. But this business of making other people uncomfortable—heterosexual people—feels a lot like bearing the burden, as a person of color, of educating White people about racism. So this raises the issue for me of what is my role as an LGBT person? To constantly educate heterosexuals about my sexual identity and/or to make them uncomfortable enough about it that they express false acceptance of it? What if, say, my supervisor is somebody who is just completely unwilling, or unable, to deal with it? Doesn't this create a hostile environment for me? And if I am also a person of color, what then?

MARK: Well, Siva, the reality is that even though we don't want people of color to have to educate White people, the fact of the matter is that they often find themselves in the position of having to do just that. We may not like it, and it may suck. (SIVA: But see that costs us the same kind of psychic energy that being in the closet does, doesn't it?). Absolutely, absolutely. But the difference I see is that the psychic energy that I expel—in having edited my entire life—to figure out who I've lied to and what lie I've told is, at some point, more difficult for me than actually educating a very uninformed person. That takes less energy. And, often times, even *during* the education process, I have the power to decide whether or not to continue educating. I can even make the decision to not expel the energy to educate before I begin doing so. I can say, "You know what, I don't care if you don't like it, but I'm not going to spend one moment more on this topic with you." And this, as opposed to, "What did I tell this person?"

SIVA: Yeah, with clear lying, I understand that. But I'm still a little bit more concerned about what I would really do if I had a supervisor who really was quite homophobic, and how I would deal with that along with issues around race. When all those things come together, I'm really not sure how I can negotiate.

MARK: That's a good hard question and I know it would be hard for me to answer. I don't want to be flippant. I've been fortunate that I haven't had to work under that experience, where the people in power were not only homophobic, but also maybe racist. This is because I've made choices about how I present myself on paper that have led to my ability to make choices about the types of places that I work. And I have done that on purpose to avoid landing in a place that going to be hostile.

ROBERT: Well this is interesting, because I was worried about our president in terms of sexual identity, but that's probably the thing he gets the most. I mean he really gets that. He is totally supportive.

MARK: There is a convergence of higher-level positions on campuses where people become secure—these positions are overwhelmingly held by White people. You know, when you look at stratification of race on campus, White people are always at the top—in the most comfortable, powerful positions. So, naturally, they are going to feel freer to come out, because they already enjoy power. Maybe this has something to do with why our president understands sexual identity more than racial identity?

SIVA: Maybe. When I taught English and Women's Studies I was struggling with being Indian and teaching African American studies. They wanted me to teach Post Colonial studies, not African American studies, right? They put me in that box at the outset. I had to fight really hard just to teach what I was trained to teach. There was just no way to bring up another piece of my identity which would undoubtedly make them even more uncomfortable

and, in response, make them want to push me further into the box.

CHRISTINE: I have a question for you. Your critique of the idea that coming out/being out in the Women's Studies context is so easy, natural, etc., sounds similar to older critiques of the women's movement and/or feminist literature as being progressively multicultural. The realities being that coming out/being out in a Women's Studies department is, maybe, easy, natural for White lesbians, and the women's movement and feminist literature are, at best, progressively Eurocentric—if such a thing is possible. They do not typically represent women of color and/or women of color do not typically see themselves in them. This goes back to the "only White lesbians can function as islands" discussion we had earlier. Do you see these as parallel issues?

SIVA: For me within the Women's Studies context the question is how do we give and, in return, get the most acceptance and nurturing? Part of the issue, because of my other identities, was acquiring the lesbian identity. I was not willing to do that if it meant relinquishing those other parts of my self that were very important to me. That's why I said that there was this policing of behaviors. You know I couldn't wear my salwar and kameez and walk around with them without it being immediately assumed that I was "fem." I didn't even know what the word "fem" meant. To me, it was like, this is what I like to wear, it's comfortable. But immediately it put me as "fem." And, I didn't know what it was. I still don't identify as "fem." I refuse to think in terms of "butch and fem." But, you know, of course, South Asians go crazy when I cut my hair short, because now they think that makes me "butch." But I don't think of myself as "butch" either. So in order to acquire this lesbian identity, I had to give up these other parts of myself. And I wouldn't, I couldn't. I think a lot of women of color felt, and maybe still feel, that in order to be a card carrying feminist, you also have to do this. You have to relinquish these other, multiple portions of who you are. And then, the other thing, was that the culture of hanging out in bars and clubs was very alien. But that's where you have to go, not necessarily to find women, but that's where the community is. And I was/am just so uncomfortable there, not necessarily with my identity, but with the community culture. It's very alien for me to go dancing. It's very alien for me to go drinking. It is very alien do those things because for me socializing means bringing people home. You invite people home and you hang out at home. Making friends and being friends and getting to know people means bringing people home. (ROBERT: How do people find each other?). Yeah, then how do I find these other people? You know—I couldn't. And everybody said, "Well you have to go to these bars." A stereotype—clearly. Because I was too scared to go. I was too like, "Well I'm not going to a bar." I mean I drink, but this particularly works against you if don't drink—as a matter of principle or a matter of religion. So then what do you do? You know, where do you find this socializing space? And I think those are some of the ways in which it's very hard to, then, connect. And then when I connect, when people *are* a match, I still feel very alienated because they still seem so different from anything that I want to be. Religion is a big part of my identity in certain ways, doing family oriented things is a part of who I am. How do I bring all of those portions of myself into what is seen when you hang out in bars every weekend? You know, leather boots, motorcycles. And the funny thing is, I used to ride a motorcycle back home in India. I still do. I think it's all those different stereotypes that I have trouble with, and I think for me, as a Woman of Color, those are the kind of things that I still struggle with.

MARK: I think that essentially—if I were to essentialize this conversation as I'm hearing it—it's that the stereotype of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender people is so in a box already, that White people have to struggle to fit into it, so people of color are going to struggle even more to fit. And when you add, on top of that, other identities that do not fit the strange little mold—I mean, as Christine alluded to earlier, we even joke about it as a community that there's that "uniform" look, way.

ROBERT: The stereotype is usually young, and it is usually White, and he's usually wearing something, and she's usually wearing something, and they're usually doing something, and they usually have a certain haircut. (SIVA: And if you have the "gaydar," you will figure it out. I mean, I could never figure it out). The reason I'm so aware of this is that a lot of my coming out was in California—where there was a 'look.' There was a 'West Hollywood look.' And I was so not it. I was so not a California gay man. It was hard to find people. I was not preferable, because I couldn't be that. But I didn't want to be that. I mean it was not real to me.

MARK: I think we are a remarkably homogenous community. I do. I find higher education to be a stifling place in terms of both racial and sexual diversity—even though we say we like difference, we really don't. We really don't. I mean, we really would much rather have everyone fit a very certain mold that looks very White to me. We want our people of color to be very much like White people—we want to emulate White people here—in terms of the way we talk, the way we dress, the way we live, how we behave, what we like to do. It's a very White way of being. And we don't exclude gay people from that either. Because again, we want to emulate the heterosexual power norm that is predicated upon White privilege.

SIVA: I brought a poem to share that I think sums up our conversation really well. It's called, *A Short Note to My Very Critical and Well-Beloved Friends and Comrades*, and it is by June Jordan:

> First they said I was too light
> Then they said I was too dark
> Then they said I was too different
> Then they said I was too much the same
> Then they said I was too young
> Then they said I was too old
> Then they said I was too interracial
> Then they said I was too much a nationalist
> Then they said I was too silly
> Then they said I was too angry
> Then they said I was too idealistic
> Then they said I was too confusing altogether:
> Make up your mind!
> They said, Are you militant? Or sweet?
> Are you vegetarian or meat?
> Are you straight? Or are you gay?'
> And I said, Hey! It's not about my mind

To me that's my most favorite, favorite poem. For me that's it. (ALL—I can relate to that). For me, that's what it is—it's about *your* mind. Because, for me, even this conversation about what it means to be LGBT people of color in higher education—I was like, "Aaahh, I don't know how I would talk about that identity without talking about all these other identities." (CHRISTINE: It's not one identity) It will never be.

Conclusion

Returning, more formally, to intersectional analysis, it is clear that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in higher education live in—as opposed to simply pass through—multiple borderlands communities as they traverse the mainstream (Anzaldúa, 1999). That is, they are rooted in the margins of both racial and sexual minority groups as they work in racial and sexual majority group-centered environments. As gay, lesbian and bisexual people, they are marginalized in racial minority group-centered meta-environments, as they are as people of color in sexual minority group-centered ones. In both meta-environments, they walk with multiple additional individual and group identities, some of which are dominant and others subordinate.

What emerges clearly from this complex web of identities is that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color on campus—by their very presence alone—challenge simplistic dichotomies of individual and

group membership, and of oppressor and oppressed identity. They move with multiple individual identities while interacting as members of groups, and they move with multiple groups identities while engaging as individuals.

In these ways, they challenge the counterhegemonic norms of various racial minority and sexual minority groups in establishing what might be called extrahegemonic norms or transformative norms—norms that require not only gay, lesbian, and bisexual people or people of color to challenge their counterhegemonic hegemony, but that take heterosexual and white people outside hegemony altogether (Darling, 2000; Weber, 2000; Wilson, Guttierez, & Chao, 2003).

In so doing, they chart a new course for human interaction and societal organization—a course that transforms the struggle for social justice from one somewhat superficially focused on identity politics in the academy, to one meaningfully directed toward resolving poverty and related forms of violence beyond ivy walls.

This is not to suggest that fighting against White supremacy, racism, homophobia, and heterosexism in higher education are not as important as, or unrelated to, fighting for self-determined sustainable development in the Third World. On the contrary, it is because of the complexity that intersectional analysis affords us in examining identity politics on campus—in this case gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color identity politics—that we are able to see the requirement for coming together across our myriad identities in taking collective political action to solve real world problems (Darling, 2002).

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in higher education are uniquely situated as members of these communities—structurally positioned as knowledge producing communities—to engage themselves and their colleagues in the kind of interdisciplinary intersectional analysis that is required to understand not only their complicated social locations in these communities, but also how socially just solutions to end suffering the world over can be developed and realized.

In exploring the complexity of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color in higher education, we can see that all people are more complex than most of our daily human interactions reflect, both on and off campus. For precisely this reason, social justice theory and practice in the academy must mature if its application to global contexts is to progress. Intersectional analysis is the key to both this maturity and progression. It is toward these ends that this article is directed.

Notes

[1] I am indebted to Mark Brimhall-Vargas, Sivagami Subbaraman, and Robert Waters for allowing me as, largely, an outsider to both of the overarching communities on which this article focuses—people of color and gay, lesbian, and bisexual people—to not only facilitate, but also to participate in, this conversation about gay, lesbian, bisexual people of color coming out dynamics in higher education.

[2] I am also indebted to Ms. Mary Graham-Fisher, Business Services Specialist in the Office of Human Relations Programs at the University of Maryland, for her work in transcribing the tapes of the interview on which this article is based.

[3] Non-exempt employees are those in administrative, trades, and other technical support staff roles.

[4] Route 1 is a divided highway that—however arbitrarily—effectively separates the primary work spaces of a majority of blue collar employees from the bulk of white collar employees at the University of Maryland, College Park.

[5] It is important to consider the roles that internalized homophobia and heterosexism may play in a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person's proclivity to relegate sexual orientation to lesser status. It is also important to consider the impact that race-based intragroup homophobia and heterosexism may have on gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color's inclination in this arena. This is not to suggest that non-White race-based homophobia and heterosexism are more prevalent than White race-based homophobia and heterosexism, simply that because racial identity is typically more consciously salient for people of color than it is for White people that they impact of this homophobia and heterosexism may be greater for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people of color than for gay, lesbian, and bisexual White people.

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