

Running head: [Straight Privilege]

Straight Privilege: Unpacking the (Still) Invisible Knapsack

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Abstract

Several unearned benefits attending straight privilege are listed, prefaced by two main arguments. First, it is argued that the rampant heterosexism in the U.S. is largely attributable to many Americans' framing of heterosexism as a matter of religious freedom rather than as a form of bigotry. It is further argued that educators' elimination of the struggles and accomplishments of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people from P-12 curricula is an act of oppression—a clear, sometimes unconscious privileging of heterosexuality that contributes to the alienation and violence routinely endured by the LGBT-identified/perceived/questioning youth in their care.

On Shoulders of Greatness

Twenty years ago, Peggy McIntosh helped educators to see and to problematize the norming of whiteness. In her classic work “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989), she made visible the multitude of ways people of color are “othered” when whiteness is understood in primary terms—as the normal, natural, most desirable kind of racial being. Two decades later, the article continues to be used routinely by justice-oriented educators who are still working hard to engage students not only in exposing and challenging white privilege, but in teaching about the construct of privilege itself. McIntosh's enduring contribution was to bring the advantages of oppression into view, enabling readers to see the other side of prejudice—i.e., the profitable flip side—and in the context of her article, to hold white people accountable for participating in and benefiting from an institutionalized system of discrimination. She wrote:

As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. . . . I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence. (p. 10)

The significance of “White Privilege” in promoting social justice and anti-racist education is inestimable. I also find it significant, however, for what it did not do. In this article, McIntosh made no reference to deeply entrenched and widely accepted prejudices directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, although she named other systems of privilege and oppression while working to define her topic of skin-color privilege.¹ Why the omission? Had she been “conditioned into oblivion” by anti-gay teachings that saturate the culture, such that the oppression of LGBT people and the privileging of heterosexuality were so normalized and naturalized as to escape notice? This seems unlikely for a women’s studies scholar with such obvious possession of a critical consciousness. Or was silence on this topic simply judged more prudent in 1989? Did her omission perhaps result from a desire to avoid conflict with religious groups? These are complicated questions for all educators to face, as theologian Sarah Sentilles explains:

Because Christianity has been used to bless discrimination against LGBT people, casting heterosexuality as God’s will and homosexuality as an abomination, many educators do not speak out in their classrooms or their schools about equal rights for LGBT people for fear of treading on someone else’s religious beliefs. Bigotry has been framed as religious freedom. (personal communication, June 23, 2009)

To be fair, in the 1980s I was a young, gay, middle school teacher who was no more vocal about heterosexism than McIntosh or anyone else in my field. To take a position opposite the one “blessed” by Christianity—even when that position argues for the essential equality, worthiness, and dignity of all people—takes courage. In fact, it takes a lot of courage. This could explain why opportunities to promote civil rights and social justice for LGBT people have routinely and historically been missed by educators who understand diversity primarily, sometimes exclusively, in terms of language, culture, and race. There is irony to appreciate here. The same arguments used to cast homosexuality as sinful and LGBT people as undeserving of equality under the law were once used to defend slavery, segregation, and racism (Sentilles, 2009).

The silence in typical P-12 schools about the struggles and accomplishments of LGBT people remains profound, but these sites are not at all quiet when it comes to harassing and abusing those who do not conform to heterosexual mandates. In fact, anti-gay slurs and other forms of violence targeting children and adolescents who identify or are perceived as LGBT are so commonplace in schools as to be unremarkable. Findings from a 2007 National School Climate Survey of 6,209 middle and high school students—“the most comprehensive report ever” on the experiences of LGBT youth (GLSEN, 2008, ¶1)—indicate that “75 percent of high school students reported hearing remarks such as ‘faggot’ or ‘dyke’ frequently, with nine out of 10 often hearing ‘that’s so gay’ or ‘you’re so gay’ (meaning stupid or worthless)” (Petrow, 2009, ¶4). Further,

- 86.2% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 44.1% reported being physically harassed and 22.1% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation.

- More than half (60.8%) of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and more than a third (38.4%) felt unsafe because of their gender expression.
- 31.7% of LGBT students missed a class and 32.7% missed a day of school in the past month because of feeling unsafe, compared to only 5.5% and 4.5%, respectively, of a national sample of secondary school students.

(GLSEN, 2008, ¶4)

The Disappeared²

At least as damaging as our society's collective failure to respond consistently and proactively to discrimination targeting sexual minorities is our near universal collusion in erasing LGBT people from history, literature, science, mathematics, the visual and performing arts, music, athletics, and every other discipline represented in the P-12 curriculum. It wasn't many decades ago that the contributions of African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and other people of color were similarly invisible in the public schools, but some progress has been made. Today it would be unthinkable to teach U.S. History without including the Civil Rights Movement, for example, and it would be preposterous to study the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. while suppressing the fact of his race. Sexual orientation, on the other hand, is routinely suppressed when students learn about Jane Addams, James Baldwin, James Buchanan, Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Gershwin, Allen Ginsberg, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, John Maynard Keynes, Leonardo da Vinci, Abraham Lincoln, Audre Lorde, Margaret Mead, Michelangelo, Florence Nightingale, Richard Rodriguez, Eleanor Roosevelt, William Shakespeare, Susan Sontag, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Alice

Walker, Walt Whitman, and others.* The sexual orientation of each of these is either confirmed as LGBT or is a topic of serious debate supported with historical evidence (Brookhiser, 2005; Casey, 1998; Famous and Gay, n.d.; Gay History Month, 2009; List of lesbian, gay, or bisexual people, n.d.; Loewen, 2007; National Organization of Gay & Lesbian Scientists & Technical Professionals, 1999; Viegas, 2004). But even if Lincoln and Shakespeare, for example, were not gay or bisexual, the question remains as to why discussion of that *possibility* is forbidden in school.

The virtually absolute but unspoken negation in P-12 schools of the existence, struggles, and accomplishments of LGBT people guarantees another day, another month, another year of harassment and abuse for LGBT-identified, perceived, and questioning youth. Educators' cooperation in "disappearing" LGBT people from the P-12 curriculum increases the probability of anti-gay violence in schools. When teachers participate in the

* A partial listing of famous people whose sexual orientation is either confirmed as LGBT or about whom historical evidence exists to support that conclusion: Jane Addams, Alexander the Great, Gloria Anzaldúa, W.H. Auden, Sir Francis Bacon, Joan Baez, Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Drew Barrymore, Roland Barthes, Cyrano de Bergerac, Leonard Bernstein, Marlon Brando, James Buchanan, Raymond Burr, William S. Burroughs, Judith Butler, Lord Byron, Caligula, Truman Capote, Willa Cather, Tracy Chapman, Arthur C. Clarke, Anderson Cooper, Noel Coward, George Cukor, Angela Davis, James Dean, Ellen DeGeneres, Marlene Dietrich, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Melissa Etheridge, Errol Flynn, E.M. Forster, Jodie Foster, Steven C. Foster, Michel Foucault, Greta Garbo, Will Geer, George Gershwin, Sir John Gielgud, Allen Ginsberg, Radclyffe Hall, Neil Patrick Harris, Patricia Highsmith, Judy Holliday, John Edgar Hoover, Vladimir Horowitz, Rock Hudson, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Patria Jimenez, Elton John, Angelina Jolie, Janis Joplin, Barbara Jordan, Frida Kahlo, John Maynard Keynes, Billie Jean King, Alfred Kinsey, Dave Koz, Nathan Lane, k.d. lang, Annie Leibovitz, Leonardo da Vinci, Liberace, Abraham Lincoln, Little Richard, Federico García Lorca, Audre Lorde, Greg Louganis, Amy Lowell, Paul Lynde, Rachel Maddow, Barry Manilow, Robert Mapplethorpe, Johnny Mathis, Armistead Maupin, Roddy McDowell, Sir Ian McKellan, Margaret Mead, Gian Carlo Menotti, Freddy Mercury, Michelangelo, Harvey Milk, Max Mutchnick, Kathy Najimy, Martina Navratilova, Rudolf Nureyev, Florence Nightingale, Rosie O'Donnell, Mary Oliver, Sir Laurence Olivier, Suze Orman, Anthony Perkins, David Hyde Pierce, Cole Porter, Tyrone Power, Marcel Proust, Ma Rainey, Maurice Ravel, Amy Ray, Robert Reed, Mary Renault, Cecil Rhodes, Adrienne Rich, Richard Rodriguez, Cesar Romero, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jane Rule, Bayard Rustin, Vita Sackville-West, Emily Saliers, Gus van Sant, Sappho, Dick Sargent, May Sarton, David Sedaris, Carly Simon, Stephen Sondheim, Susan Sontag, Gertrude Stein, Andrew Sullivan, Sheryl Swoopes, Wanda Sykes, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Mark Tewksbury, Martha Carey Thomas, Alice B. Toklas, Lily Tomlin, Alan M. Turing, Gore Vidal, Jane Wagner, Rufus Wainwright, Alice Walker, Andy Warhol, John Waters, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Monique Wittig, Virginia Woolf, Kenji Yoshino (Brookhiser, 2005; Casey, 1998; Famous and Gay, n.d.; Gay History Month, 2009; List of lesbian, gay, or bisexual people, n.d.; Loewen, 2007; National Organization of Gay & Lesbian Scientists & Technical Professionals, 1999; Viegas, 2004).

“othering” of this minority by banishing them from view and by insisting the words *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *transgender* remain unutterable in front of 10- and 15-year-olds—and unthinkable in front of 5-year-olds—we communicate volumes to all of our students. Whether we consciously intend it or not, our collective othering-by-omission is an unequivocal marking of Those-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named as vaguely dirty or profane and clearly unacceptable, unworthy, and unequal.

It should not be surprising when some students interpret their parents’ and teachers’ collective silence regarding the lives and accomplishments of LGBT people as tacit permission for them to join in the “othering” of actual or perceived LGBT classmates, punishing those who deviate in any way from strict heterosexual norms. For these students, it can be a short step—from witnessing the teacher’s refusal to remove or at least challenge the scarlet G painted by “godly” people on the foreheads of LGBT youth—to committing the verbal, psychological, and physical acts of violence against them that the red, red target invites. Tragically, it is not only the bullied who are badly hurt when those scarlet targets are charged. Anti-gay youth coached to violence can pay a steep price for it, while their legions of anti-equality adult coaches³ wonder speciously from the sidelines what went “wrong” when their prejudices against LGBT people translate to youth violence. It is entirely predictable that the bull, sufficiently goaded, will eventually charge the cape; only a few will mourn his fall. Fewer still will fault the bullfighter and picadors who were just doing their jobs, or the spectators who, after all, were only watching.

The Need for Courage

I have seen enough courageous teaching to know that pockets of resistance to faith-based oppression against LGBT people exist in schools and communities

throughout the nation. But as a whole, educators' typical silence about the struggles and contributions of LGBT people foretells more tragedies like the murder of Lawrence King, the 14-year-old who was shot in the head, twice, on February 12, 2008 by a classmate inside E.O. Greene Jr. High School in Oxnard, California. This incident is a particularly tragic illustration of many *benefits* accompanying straight privilege that I will describe later in more detail. Most prominently, it highlights the reality that when straight people are victims of violence, their identity as heterosexuals will not be offered as a plausible explanation for it. Larry King's murder exposes widespread social acceptance for blaming LGBT victims for the violence they suffer. Initial news coverage of this tragedy focused eagerly on King's atypical behaviors, not the murderer's. The lesson, of course, is that King was killed because he was gay—not because his killer had internalized the heterosexist beliefs and values that his culture had successfully impressed upon him. Reinforced in small ways every day, such lessons promote straight privilege and naturalize the advantages heterosexuals have learned to accept as rightly theirs.

Educators' continued, collective deletion of LGBT people from all of the subject areas we teach means also that additional bully-assisted suicides will be more likely, when the “months of merciless anti-gay harassment” (Bolcer, 2009, ¶7) can no longer be endured by students who are persecuted every day—while they are in our care—for violating rigid and unquestioned heterosexual mandates. That is as certain as the following is true: Our widespread personal and professional silence contributed to the despair of Jaheem Herrera of DeKalb County, Georgia, age 10, and Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover of Springfield, Massachusetts, age 11, who both hanged themselves in April 2009. They did so because they could no longer face the “extreme daily bullying that included anti-gay taunts” (¶2) and “threats of violence, some of which included anti-gay

epithets” (Hyde, 2009, ¶2) from their classmates. Jaheem’s best friend described that reality to the boy’s grieving mother, explaining to her after Jaheem died that “he’s tired of everybody always messing with him in school. He is tired of telling the teachers and the staff, and they never do anything about the problems. So the only way out is by killing himself” (Bolcer, 2009, ¶4).

The safety and well being of all students should always be an urgent priority. However, with hate crimes in the U.S. reportedly on the rise in response to recent phenomena in social, political, and financial realms—for example, the increased visibility in the news of LGBT-related struggles, the 2008 election of the first American president of color, and the economic crisis inherited by the new administration (Gay Bias Killings Highest Since 1999, 2009; Obama Win Sparks Rise in Hate Crimes, Violence, 2008; Romero, 2009; AG Holder Urges New Hate Crimes Law, 2009)—the always-pressing need to emphasize the dignity and civil rights of all people is most particularly and currently vital. As the Director of the Anti-Defamation League, Bruce DeBoskey, put it, “When hate is not exposed, when it goes unchecked, it can lead to violence” (Romero, 2009, ¶5). Richard Hazler (2000), professor of counselor education and coordinator of the Elementary School Counseling program at Penn State University, allows us to connect the dots even more precisely. He wrote:

Violence does not begin with gang warfare, rape, murder, and suicide.

That is when society becomes afraid of violence. Instead it begins as put downs, insults, threats, harassment, and bullying, where inappropriate lessons of how to deal with others are learned and where frustration, resentment, and anger build (Violence Continuum, ¶6).

Fortunately, a majority of citizens throughout our nation's history have repeatedly demonstrated the ability to reframe perspectives on the "othering" of various minorities, eventually. Most Americans now see chapters of our national history (e.g., of enslaving, torturing, imprisoning, and oppressing various minorities and of misappropriating their land and property) not only as wrong, but as atrocious and shameful. It is past time for this kind of realization to occur on behalf of sexual minorities. As the violence described above makes clear, the reframing of individual and collective views that serve to support institutionally sanctioned discrimination against LGBT people is desperately needed—especially in our nation's schools and schools of education.

For Lessons on Dealing with Others: Look Inward

Some of our most important work in preparing to teach in P-12 classrooms is in coming to understand who we are (e.g., what causes our fear, what gives us joy) and in knowing who we want to become as human beings and as educators. This requires us to cultivate the habits of being critically reflective and honest with ourselves so we can explore our tendencies and capacities for experiencing the world (e.g., our tendencies and capacities for prejudice and openness, certainty and ambiguity, hate and love). This is essential and foundational work, as Parker Palmer (1998) explained:

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. ... When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only

abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth. (p. 2)

The problem is that exposing our own prejudices and intentionally surfacing them for critical examination is notoriously difficult to do; their invisibility is what makes them effective in shaping our worldview. To address this challenge, I turn again to McIntosh and her knapsack for guidance. She led the way by writing about unpacking privileges, not prejudices. This makes sense to me. After all, as a white-female-gay-middle-class-American-liberal-teacher-scholar, I cannot speak to anyone's prejudices but my own. As a lesbian, however, I can identify straight privilege and attendant advantages that I see. In fact, I am probably better positioned to see these things than most readers, just as it is more likely for people of color and for women, respectively, to truly understand racism and misogyny. Privileges and their advantages are most easily seen when the viewing perspective is outside the realm of access.

As with all forms of unearned privilege, the comfort of customary access leads to a sense of entitlement that can only be recognized, interrogated, and reconstructed from the inside—meaning authentic invitation to critical thought and open, safe environments for questions and discussions are essential conditions to nurture, if students and teachers are to productively experience cognitive dissonance on this topic. In the absence of such learning conditions, it is more likely that this sense of entitlement will remain unexamined by the majority of students and teachers alike, contributing to their inability or unwillingness to make visible and to problematize at least four things: (1) the unearned advantages attending unearned privileges; (2) the inability of others to access those privileges and their benefits; (3) the price of one's own customary entitlement, typically paid by those who lack access entirely to those privileges and benefits; (4) the

defensiveness and anger that emerge when customary access to unearned privileges and their benefits is threatened. For beginning (and experienced) teachers to whom such things are invisible and/or unproblematic, Parker Palmer's message bears repeating: "When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well."

Anticipating the Likelihood of Change Blindness

We often cannot see what we do not expect to see (Awareness Test, n.d.). Psychologists call this kind of perceptual failure in visual processing *change blindness*, which is "the frequent inability of our visual system to detect alterations to something staring us straight in the face" (Angier, 2008, ¶4).⁴ As far as I know, change blindness is established as scientifically relevant only to the study of visual attentiveness. It seems potentially helpful, though, to borrow the phrase and use it as an analogy for describing the perceptual challenge of detecting interior rather than visual "alterations."

I urge readers to acknowledge a potential tendency for interior change blindness that may cause resistance to acknowledging unearned privileges, which, once visible, can threaten continued access to the benefits they bring. I do not assume that all readers are experiencing a sense of entitlement, however unconsciously, as members of one or more of many identity categories normed in the dominant culture (e.g., heterosexual, white, male, Christian, capitalist, Democrat or Republican, slender, able-bodied, youthful, college-bound or college graduate, English-fluent). I do assume that most readers may learn something new and perhaps otherwise benefit from a lesbian perspective on straight privilege. In attempting to provide this, my goals are: (1) to make the physical, verbal, and psychological violence of straight privilege more broadly visible; (2) to attribute

responsibility for that violence to those who derive benefits from straight privilege and/or whose language and other behaviors are overtly heterosexist; and (3) to encourage LGBTs (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and straight) people to resist heterosexism actively and to continually acknowledge, examine, and challenge heterosexual privilege and the unearned advantages it brings. Given the reality that 90-95% of the general population is straight,⁵ a lesbian perspective on straight privilege should offer new insights, arguments, and questions for heterosexual teachers working to see into the shadows of what, for some, may have been a previously unexamined aspect of life.

I urge readers, also, to think of particular children and adolescents and to hold them in mind as they read the following perspective on the benefits of straight privilege. Untold numbers of elementary, middle-, and high-school students are deciding in this very moment whether their last shred of hope is strong enough to get them through one more day of anti-gay abuse, or if today is the day they should finally give in to the despair that engulfs them. On their behalf, I hope all readers' minds are stretched to their limits in the direction of choosing the openness, tolerance for ambiguity, and care that these kids are literally dying to see in their parents, teachers, principals, and other respected leaders in their lives.

So, what does it mean for heterosexuals to have their identity normed, understood in primary terms as the normal, natural, most desirable condition of sexual being?⁶ What benefits are associated with the privileging of straightness?⁷ What follows is not an exhaustive answer to these questions, but merely a reflection of my experience in living them.

Straight Privilege: A Partial Listing of Benefits for Educators to Consider

1. Your heterosexuality will be presumed. You will never have to make the decision about how/when/whether to inform your family, friends, and co-workers about your sexuality.
2. You can keep a picture of your partner or spouse on your desk without worrying about the questions it will raise in your classroom and school. You can assume that your employer, colleagues, students, and their families will be welcoming and appreciative if your partner attends school functions or helps out with special projects in your classroom.
3. You can celebrate your family in every social and professional context imaginable without worrying about losing anything (e.g., your job, relationships with family and friends, the opportunity to rent an apartment, the opportunity to adopt a child) as a consequence of being “out” as a heterosexual.
4. No one will ever suggest your less-than-equal, abnormal status by describing you as “a known heterosexual” or as “openly heterosexual,” any more than they would call you “openly Christian,” “a known Republican/Democrat,” or “an open capitalist.”
5. When you developed your first crush you could tell someone about it without worrying about your physical and relational safety. You could experience the agony of first love in the confidence of your friends and/or family—rather than in fear that these people would no longer want to be your friends and family if you confided in them. If you let the object of your affection know you were interested, rejection and embarrassment would likely be the worst consequences you could imagine.
6. You know who your potential love interests might be. You didn’t go through early and later adolescence wondering if there were others like you whom you could date,

if only you could find them. If you could get a date, you could participate in adolescent rites of passage as a matter of course. You could look forward to the prom and other social functions without anticipating that you and your girlfriend/boyfriend would be stared at, ridiculed, attacked, or featured in the news.

7. Sex education was about *your* sexuality. It was understood that you needed opportunities to learn about your heterosexuality, to have your questions about it heard and explored, to understand what it means to be a responsible, sexually active person, and to prepare for the possibility of becoming a parent.
8. When grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins at every family gathering asked whether you had a boyfriend/girlfriend yet (assumed to be a person of the opposite sex), you were not required to either “admit” to them that you’re straight or lie to them about your social prospects.
9. When you were the target of others’ prejudice and/or hatred as a heterosexual child or adolescent (e.g., on the basis of race, culture, language, class, religion, sex⁸), you were less likely than LGBT-identified and questioning youth to be entirely on your own in figuring out how to deal with it. You were more likely to have family and friends who share the same major identity characteristics with you, who could support you, face the discrimination and pain alongside you, and teach you how to resist internalizing others’ unfounded beliefs and judgments about you.
10. It is extremely unlikely that your property will be vandalized or that you will be teased, bullied, attacked, or killed because people object to your being straight. If you are vandalized, teased, bullied, attacked, or murdered, it will not occur to anyone to explain that it happened to you because you’re a heterosexual. Your sexual orientation will not be blamed for inciting others’ violence against you.

11. You are less likely to face social and/or financial consequences for transgressing gender norms. You will probably not have to spend any of your life's time struggling to negotiate a job search, an apartment rental or home purchase, relationships, work, clothing, etc., through the reality of female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998), for example, or male femininity.
12. If you are a woman, others are unlikely to accuse you of wanting to be a man if you wear your hair short or prefer slacks over dresses. Others may disapprove of your choices, but you can express a degree of female masculinity without compromising your identity as a woman and your appreciation for being female. (While I cannot speak from experience to a gay man's experience of the social consequences that come with expressing a degree of male femininity, I believe they are more severe than the social consequences that often attend expressions of female masculinity. I believe this is explained by misogyny, which is at least as prevalent in the U.S. as heterosexism. In a misogynistic society, traits and behaviors associated with masculinity are more respected and more valued than those associated with femininity. A female with masculine characteristics may be ridiculed for her "failure" to satisfy the male gaze, but she may also benefit in some ways from the association of masculinity with competence and authority. A male with feminine characteristics may be seen as having given up the coin of the realm—an unforgiveable offense to the patriarchy.)
13. You are never harassed or stared at while walking into or using a public restroom or locker room, because no one is fearful of or uncomfortable with your perceived heterosexuality. You can use public facilities without giving a thought to physical safety or potential embarrassment.

14. If your parents are Christians, they didn't teach you that you were headed for hell because you're straight. You didn't grow up wondering why a loving God could create you and then damn you for eternity. When you were as young as 8-10 years old (or younger) you didn't think to associate kissing someone of the same sex with burning in hell, or know that you had to keep nightmares along those lines a secret from everyone you knew.
15. You can hold hands, kiss, and embrace the person you love whenever and wherever you want. It doesn't occur to you to consider where you are, first, or to quickly check who's nearby so you can calculate the risks. When you do hold hands and kiss in public, you don't have to worry that you are feeding the vulgar curiosities of the people nearby.
16. When you're at work, shopping, at the movies, or in a restaurant, it will never occur to you that the many unfriendly or rude people you meet dislike you on sight because they cannot easily categorize you as male or female, or because their god tells them you're an abomination.
17. You can attend religious and social events everywhere and be reasonably confident that you will be welcomed, probably enthusiastically so.
18. No one, including your heterosexual friends, will mock you for being *too* straight. There is no such thing as "too straight." (One can never be too normal. In fact, one of the ways you can confirm that your straight identity is normal/natural/desirable is by noticing the absence of jokes about heterosexuality circulating online and through other social contexts. The less acceptable and common it is to mock a particular category of identity, the more "normed" and socially powerful it is.)

19. You enjoy all of the rights guaranteed in the Constitution, including the first which assures that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...”⁹ Your life options are not prescribed or limited by other people’s religious or personal beliefs. No one will use their religious/personal beliefs about sexuality as the basis for “saving” you from holding your own religious/personal beliefs. No one is interested in amending state and federal constitutions to make sure that their religious/personal beliefs can keep you from marrying the person you love.

You can get married and divorced as many times as you want; you can be unfaithful; you can be verbally and physically abusive; you can kill your spouse or rape your niece—and your right to participate in the “sanctity” of marriage will be honored.

Federal and state laws not only guarantee your right as a heterosexual person to marry, they will provide more than 1100 government-sponsored benefits if and when you do (Johnson, n.d.). Included among the benefits provided by the federal government, for example, are:

- assumption of spouse’s pension
- bereavement leave
- immigration sponsorship
- insurance breaks
- medical decisions on behalf of partner
- sick leave to care for partner
- Social Security survivor benefits
- tax breaks
- veteran’s discounts

- visitation of partner in hospital or prison.

State-level benefits within the U.S. include:

- assumption of spouse's pension
- automatic inheritance
- automatic housing lease transfer
- bereavement leave
- burial determination
- child custody
- crime victim's recovery benefits
- divorce protections
- domestic violence protection
- exemption from property tax on partner's death
- immunity from testifying against spouse
- insurance breaks
- joint adoption and foster care
- joint bankruptcy
- joint parenting (insurance coverage, school records)
- medical decisions on behalf of partner
- certain property rights
- reduced rate memberships
- sick leave to care for partner
- visitation of partner's children
- visitation of partner in hospital or prison
- wrongful death benefits (Johnson, n.d.).

20. You had countless thousands of opportunities in school to see and to study the lives, struggles, and accomplishments of heterosexuals—that is, of people like you. When the sexual orientation of the people you studied was unknown, the assumption of heterosexuality was automatic.
21. Most teachers will presume and some will police your child’s heterosexuality. Any behaviors challenging that presumption will be noted, probably discussed with other teachers, and possibly used as the basis for referring your child for counseling.
22. Although “there is solid evidence that over 92% of child abuse cases, including same-gender sexual abuse, are perpetrated by heterosexuals” (Dispelling Myths of Homosexuality, Myth #6 ¶2, n.d.), you can teach, coach Little League, and be a camp counselor without worrying that some parents will assume you’re a pedophile.
23. Family members, friends, and complete strangers want you to have children. They will not worry that you are going to “recruit” your kids to be heterosexuals, too.
24. Books, television shows, and movies about straight couples will be available to your child at a *very* early age, at home and in school. No one will worry that your young child is imagining those couples having sex or wondering exactly what kind of sex they might enjoy. When heterosexual couples are depicted in children’s books, television programs, and movies, they will be understood—by your child and by everyone else—as partners who are participating in the full complexity of a loving relationship, not as two people whose connection is entirely defined by the performance of sexual acts.
25. You can view television programs with scenes of heterosexual intimacy without being warned beforehand that the program may not be suitable for young viewers because people like you will be shown kissing and touching each other. Further, story

lines can be counted on to present individual heterosexuals as complex people for whom sex is just one of many concerns, who more often than not fall in love and live happily ever after, and whose sexual orientation in and of itself doesn't serve as the obligatory punchline (or alternatively, as the tragic ending) for the story.

I could go on. My purpose here, though, is not to exhaust the topic or to imply that life in the LGBT borderlands is bad. In fact, I enjoy benefits as a gay woman¹⁰ that I believe my straight friends and colleagues are probably less likely to experience. For example: I have never experienced the destructively competitive behaviors that my straight female friends describe as common among many girls and women; I feel complete freedom to allow friendships to develop as they will—with females and males alike—among new acquaintances, colleagues, and past students, whereas straight friends tell me they cannot as easily allow friendships to develop with members of the opposite sex (and some straight female friends say they don't trust women and can't develop friendships with them); it is easy for me to reject social pressures to perform femininity; I am able to allow self worth to derive from what I do rather than from how I look, which I believe would be far less likely had I spent my adolescence and early adulthood disciplining myself to satisfy a male gaze; while it was undeniably difficult growing up “alone” inside a family of eight,¹¹ I learned very early to rely on myself—and a benefit I attribute to that reality is that I rarely experience the feelings of obligation and guilt that seem common for many girls and women in the U.S.

In Conclusion: Hope, Accountability, and Democracy's Fighting Chance

The purpose I set out to accomplish with this article, in naming straight privilege and listing some of the benefits deriving from it, was to make visible the injustices of every day that allow anti-gay language and other kinds of violence to seem natural,

normal, and acceptable to many members of the heterosexual majority. I hope I have achieved this aim. I further hope this piece might play a part in helping individual student teachers and experienced educators to deconstruct and reframe the conditions that are currently keeping the lives, struggles and contributions of LGBT people from having a place in the P-12 curriculum.

While the effects of heterosexism are battled around the world every day by LGBT people and their straight allies, I hope that the problem of and responsibility for heterosexism might become understood as belonging more accurately to: (1) the heterosexual majority, who must claim either ignorance or entitlement to continue to accept the unearned benefits of straight privilege; and (2) the people of faith who have fought against the principles of equality and religious freedom for all—using their beliefs to justify laws that prescribe and limit life options for others, like me, whose religious/personal beliefs are different from but no less Constitutionally-protected than theirs—and who must also claim ignorance or entitlement to continue justifying their faith-based abridgement of others' civil rights. I hope this article will play a part in making it more difficult for members of both groups to claim ignorance of the advantages they accept for themselves and deny for others.

Heterosexual and religious allies who can no longer tolerate the injustice of straight privilege are needed. They can be better heard in this fight for LGBT civil rights because of their access to privilege, a reality that is comparable in some ways to the circumstances of white abolitionists in the 1800s. A critical mass of gay and straight alliances is what will eventually bring lasting change.

When different kinds of laws exist to create different categories of citizens, reasonable people must admit a fatal flaw in their democracy. Untold thousands of 10-

11-, and 14-year-olds like Jaheem Herrera, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, and Lawrence King know this already, of course. Experience teaches many youth in a very short time that the state of our society is *not* “characterized by formal equality of rights and privileges” (democracy, n.d.). Educators are in an immediate and powerful position to name and challenge this reality in their classrooms and schools. These are among the small spaces of infinite possibility where equality, liberty, and justice for all can have a fighting chance.

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Notes

¹ In defining her scope of view for "White Privilege," McIntosh (1989) wrote, "I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of White privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions which I think in my case *attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege* than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined." (p. 10, emphasis in original)

² I intentionally invoke the violent metaphor of forced disappearances associated with military dictatorships and defined as follows. "A forced disappearance occurs when force is used (by, for example, agents of a state) to cause a person to vanish from public view, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty (and/or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person), thereby placing the victim outside the protection of law. According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,

which came into force on July 1, 2002, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed at any civilian population, a ‘forced disappearance’ qualifies as a crime against humanity, and thus is not subject to a statute of limitation.” (forced disappearance, 2009, ¶1)

³ These include the many church leaders and elected officials who have spoken out against same sex marriage and other civil rights for LGBT people, including Pope Benedict, James Dobson, Reverend Rick Warren, and President Barack Obama. Anti-equality coaches for youth also include the multitudes of heterosexist, neutral, and/or unengaged parents, teachers, and administrators who actively promote or passively accept constructions of LGBT people that dehumanize and define them as inherently unequal to heterosexuals.

⁴ In one study, for example, “pedestrians giving directions to a Cornell researcher posing as a lost tourist didn’t notice when, midway through the exchange, the sham tourist was replaced by another person altogether” (Angier, 2008, ¶4).

⁵ The percentage varies, depending on how heterosexuality is defined and which demographic methodologies are used to identify LGBT people (Bowers, 2009; GLBTQ Dictionary, 2004, Estimating the Size of the Gay and Lesbian Population section, ¶1-3; Johnson, n.d.)

⁶ McIntosh, a white woman, named the privileges that she could see were available to her but not to her African American co-workers, friends, and acquaintances. I take the opposite position in identifying privileges, naming those that are available to my heterosexual co-workers, friends, and acquaintances but not to LGBT people.

⁷ See also Earlham students, 2004 for another treatment of these questions, also inspired by McIntosh (1989).

⁸ I intentionally omit the categories of disability (physical and mental) and special learning needs. I believe this benefit can be as unavailable to children with disabilities and/or special learning needs as to LGBT-identified and questioning youth.

⁹ I am no expert on the First Amendment. But when I read that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,” I am dumbfounded by the fact that homosexuality is a topic that matters to people elected to uphold and defend the Constitution—unless it is understood by those people as relevant because LGBT Americans do not enjoy equality under the law and are therefore denied their civil rights. I am dumbfounded that our democracy is so very fragile and imperiled, that the civil rights of some can be so easily abridged by the religious/personal beliefs of others. I am two shades beyond dumbfounded that my president, whose win I campaigned for, participated in, and celebrated, is a Constitutional scholar whose *beliefs* about whether I should be allowed to marry—and to access the 1100+ government-sponsored benefits accompanying marriage (see benefit #18)—trump my access to equality under the law.

¹⁰ I do not presume to speak for all lesbians. These are benefits particular to my experience, which may or may not be widely shared.

¹¹ However, I recognize the extraordinary privilege and advantages I enjoy because I was raised in a family by caring parents, with stable access to food, shelter, and medical/dental care.