

Beyond **the Queer**
aLphabet:

**Conversations on
Gender, Sexuality and
Intersectionality**

Edited by
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Beyond The Queer Alphabet

Teaching Equity Matters E-Book Series

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‘Stand Up’ for Exclusion?: Queer Pride, Ableism and Inequality

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It was Queer Pride Week 2011 in Edmonton, as we began to write this piece. Our city’s billboards are wrapped with rainbow-colored posters of young scantily-clad men with bulging... muscles. Unfortunately, we have come to expect a significant dose of ableism, ageism, racism and fatphobia at Pride festivals across North America. In 2011, however, the Edmonton Pride Festival Society⁷⁰ made ableism official!

Edmonton Pride’s official slogan in 2011 was “STAND UP.”⁷¹ Although dismayed by the ableist⁷² language, we were hoping, at the very least, that this slogan signaled a move towards a more political Pride: A move away from the festival that had renamed itself after a bank two years ago and that had begun banning some political queer groups from marching (most notably in Toronto). But what Edmonton Pride is standing up for this year is *not* greater equity. The event listings tell the disappointing story: “Stand up... and boogie”; and “Stand up... and barbeque” – as if there was nothing of political value left for queers to ‘stand up’ for.

The Pride slogan, poster and website, however, demonstrate that there is still much work to be done. On the poster, “STAND UP”⁷³ is written in white monolithic letters below the *diversity*-rainbow-coloured silhouettes of six immaculately non-diverse bodies in progressive stages of getting up to stand. On one side of the poster are three square, thin, muscular silhouettes: one in ‘thinker’ pose; one crouching as though about to begin a sprint; and one standing with arms and legs wide apart, taking up space. On the other side are three smaller, super-thin-yet-curvy multi-colored figures: one on knees and bum sitting in a ‘schoolgirl’ pose (like the pornography pose, minus the braids and the kilt); one on knees with head thrown back to show off large, perky breasts; one standing with arms and legs pulled together to make space for the more masculine standing counterpart. The Edmonton Pride website bears the slogan and poster below a banner photograph which features scantily-clad, athletic looking white-skinned men wearing afro-like wigs. There is still so much work to be done.

Among the many race, gender and ability issues with these images of supposed queer diversity, is the noticeable lack of fat, gender-queer, wheeling, scootering, ageing, small-statured, cane-wielding, pre-pubescent and dog-guided members of our queer communities. The *lack* of any significantly diverse

⁷⁰ Edmonton Pride Festival. (2012). Home. Retrieved from <http://www.edmontonpride.ca/>

⁷¹ Edmonton Pride Festival. (2012). Home. Retrieved from <http://www.edmontonpride.ca/>

⁷² Fedcan Blog. (2011). Home. Retrieved from <http://blog.fedcan.ca/tag/ableism-and-disability/>

⁷³ Edmonton Pride Festival. (2012). Home. Retrieved from <http://www.edmontonpride.ca/>

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bodies in the *diversity* poster and website might not have struck many Pride-goers as strange however, since many of these bodies are structurally excluded from Queer⁷⁴ events, in general.

Every summer, for example, the Edmonton Pride Festival Society rents one of the most accessible⁷⁵ venues in Edmonton, and, through great expense and logistical prowess, manages to transform it into an almost entirely inaccessible space (despite years of being offered free or cheap alternatives for rendering the space more accessible). Year round, gay parties and events are held almost exclusively in bars or galleries that are up or down at least a flight of stairs. Most of these events don't allow minors, won't accommodate wheelchairs, have gender-segregated washrooms, and are not set up for those who see or hear in non-normative ways. With few 'standing up' against (or perhaps even taking note of) these exclusions, many community members end up having to *sit* out most 'queer' events.

Of course, mainstream gay movements are perhaps too easy targets. The pivotal question behind this blog entry extends much further than Edmonton or Pride. We ask: Are our academic, artistic and activist movements that claim to be equity-based any less ableist and any more accessible than the Edmonton Pride example herein?

In Robert McRuer's groundbreaking work, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*,⁷⁶ he argues that the exclusion, marginalization or complete erasure of disability is common to contemporary queer politics and to activist politics more generally. One of his most poignant examples is the 2004 World Social Forum⁷⁷ (WSF) in Mumbai, India, a global activist network that protested the World Economic Forum by collectively imagining alternatives to globalized capitalism. The WSF earned protests of its own, however, due to its lack of accessibility and the organizers' refusal to include a speaker on disability issues. The WSF's slogan was 'Another World Is Possible,' yet it remained somewhat impossible for WSF activists to imagine disability as having a place in this new world, let alone in the movement that might create it.

There is an eerie familiarity to this seeming impossibility of imagining accessibility and disability issues as vital components of social movements. Think about it. Have you recently attended any of the following?:

- Equity-based academic conferences or lectures organized without any physical, visual or audio accessibility forethought?
- 'Take back the night' or G8 marches planned on inaccessible routes?
- Film festivals in which wheelchair users are deemed fire hazards and are not allowed in the theatre, and where captions are turned off because normative audience members find them 'distracting'?

⁷⁴ Queer Studies. (2011, December 17). Retrieved December 29, 2011 from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_studies

⁷⁵ Accessibility. (2012, January 2). Retrieved January 2, 2012 from Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accessibility>

⁷⁶ McRuer, R. (2006). *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press.

⁷⁷ World Social Forum. (2011, December 30). Retrieved on January 1, 2012 from Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum#2004_World_Social_Forum

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- Expensive queer parties or fundraisers held in spaces with gender-segregated washrooms, inaccessible entrances and no minors allowed?

More importantly, did you notice these structural exclusions at the time? People often don't notice these barriers because excluded bodies usually cannot enter these spaces to demonstrate their inaccessibility. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy and one that has very real consequences for the bodies and communities that are excluded, as well as for those of us who fail to address these systemic exclusions.

Odds are, however, that some of you *have* noticed some of these barriers at least some of the time. There are, after all, vibrant activist communities that work hard at identifying and creatively responding to the ways that they participate in the inequitable treatment and exclusion of others. Some projects structured around such an equity politics include: The Vancouver Queer Film Festival;⁷⁸ the Acsexability sex party folks in Toronto; and the Health, Embodiment and Visual Culture Conference⁷⁹ held in Hamilton. The proverbial wheel has already been invented; the wheel is constantly being re-created in exciting new ways. Unfortunately, too many equity-based events have yet to imagine that wheels, canes, and the like have a place in their communities.

As inundated as we are, this week, with the inequitable politics of Pride, Edmontonians are finally getting a taste of equity-oriented queer celebrations. The Exposure Queer Arts and Culture Festival⁸⁰ is making radical moves towards removing barriers to their festival and to Edmonton's queer scene in general. It started with their "All Bodies Pool Party": an outdoor, wheelchair accessible, pay-what-you-can, all-ages, all-gender affair. Finally, queer Edmontonians – like queers elsewhere – have a choice: "Stand Up!" for the ableism of Pride, or sit in on an accessible queer/crip celebration of swimming, mobilizing and imagining more inclusive images, activities, events and communities.

⁷⁸ Vancouver Queer Film Festival. (2008). Home. Retrieved from <http://www.queerfilmfestival.ca/>

⁷⁹ Health, Embodiment and Visual Culture: Engaging Publics and Pedagogies. (2010). Exhibition. Retrieved from <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~english/HealthEmbodimentVisualCulture/Exhibition.html>

⁸⁰ Exposure. (n.d.). The 5th Annual Exposure. Retrieved from <http://www.exposurefestival.ca/>