

Queer Failure for Diversity Seekers?

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Many diversity coalitions in university structures fall short of their goals, along a number of different axes. Some don't garner allies across a wide variety of groups interested in diversity. Others succumb to conflicts between groups interested in different axes of diversity – whether those axes are race, gender, nationalities, sexualities, positional differences, or any other axes on which they might advocate for recognition, legitimation, rights, equality, or humane treatment. Still others do not find powerful allies in institutions motivated to translate diversity advocacy to results from that advocacy. Others have trouble figuring out and/or communicating to powerful allies what it is that those allies need to do to be of assistance. Still others 'sell out' when establishing relationships with powerful allies, such that those relationships shift the commitments and advocacy priorities of the diversity coalitions, or their many multi-faceted parts.

Certainly, one short paper cannot solve the complicated problems of the relationships between marginalized identities, the difficulties of margin-margin and margin-center relationships, the policy problems of how to recommend and find substantive and representational diversity in institutions of higher education, and/or the challenges of expanding interest and resource 'pies' to make space for all of the members of diversity coalitions. And this one does not aspire to. Instead, it uses some of the theoretical observations from my current research in (queer) International Relations to suggest some of the factors that might be inhibiting diversity coalitions' successes, both in formation and in opportunities for change – and, relatedly, some paths that may help undo some of the difficulties diversity coalitions often encounter. Rather than attempting comprehensiveness, this piece looks at three theoretical directions in queer IR/queer global studies that might have escaped consideration in thinking about how to form and grow diversity coalitions. It engages theorizing on the violences of inclusion, on queer failure, and on queer necropolitics to talk about some of the potential pitfalls diversity coalitions face, and some ways that those pitfalls might be avoided.

The Violence of Inclusion

In diversity coalitions in university environments, we often focus on *including* and *representing* diverse groups: how do we get more women, minorities, and other underrepresented groups on the faculty in fair and reasonable numbers? How do we make sure that they are treated *the same* as the white men whose presence on the faculty is assumed? That they are held to the same standards, given the same workload, and given the same chances for advancement, raises, and other opportunities?

This is, of course, a real problem – because those people and groups have been traditionally *excluded* from hiring, advancement, and opportunities in university structures and remain so even in an era in which universities swear by equal opportunities, target-of-opportunity hires, and other words that mean ‘really, we’re serious about addressing our diversity problems. At least, kind of.’ In feminist IR theorizing, Christine Sylvester used the concept of ‘homelessness’ in global politics to think about this – who is ‘homeless’ in our university organizations? While diversity coalitions rarely use this language, they are often interested in *homing* people from all sorts of underrepresented groups in university settings.

Homing can have a lot of normative good – it can be transformative in representative terms (where we get more diverse workforces) and even in a political sense (where policies like parental leave and spousal hires are introduced to serve the needs to traditionally underrepresented groups). To me, it goes without saying that these sorts of inclusions and transformations are better than the status quo or regression on axes of inclusiveness. At the same time, diversity coalitions tend to argue (or just assume) that a combination of inclusiveness and accommodation will redress universities’ diversity problems, and then be surprised when those policies backfire or have mixed results. When I suggest that sometimes those policies backfire or have mixed results, I mean things like that “inclusion” means minorities, women, and/or minority women end up doing more service work to make sure that their “perspective” is represented on committees, or stereotype-based assumptions are made about the needs and desires of people in underrepresented groups. Often, diversity coalitions treat these results as evidence of the need for more inclusion and more accommodation.

Queer theorizing suggests that there are violences to inclusion which matter, though, whether or not they outweigh the benefits of inclusion, and that those violences are not *all* fixable by procedural changes to modes of inclusion. (e.g., Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2013). Inclusion in a ‘home’ which requires conformity to particular norms or qualification by particular traits is itself a sort of *exclusion* combined with and bound up in violence (Sjoberg 2012). This is because, while there are dangers in being ‘homeless,’ it is equally dangerous to be assigned membership in a ‘home’ to which one does not [feel like one] belong[s]. Such an assignment imputes traits to people being *included* which may or may not fit. The syllogism that equates inclusion to safety and security is at best an imperfect map, because inclusion requires performance of belonging. In university settings, liberal inclusiveness *both* requires disciplining of the included *and* an ‘other’ that remains excluded (e.g., Butler 2004; Inayatullah and Blaney 2004). In this way (talking about institutions of nationalist pride), Puar (2006) argues that even as our existing frameworks expand to include the previously excluded ‘other’ (in Puar’s terms, ‘the

queer other-within'), they remain violent *both* towards their constitutive others and in their disciplining of the normal within the included. This is in part a *process* problem with inclusion: that is, in Cynthia Enloe's (1990) terms, institutions of masculinity (and racism and heterosexism) do not automatically change their cultures as a result of inclusion, but must pay attention to not only representation but substantive change. However, queer theorizing suggests it might also be a necessary problem endogenous to inclusion, since inclusion itself is a disciplining move. Becomes important, then, for diversity coalitions to ask what we are including people in, and what the requirements for entry/continued inclusion are.¹ In looking to escape those punishing norms that are as violent in their *inclusion*² as they are in their *exclusion* "queer studies offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems" (Halberstam 2011, 89).

The Queer Art of Failure

It is on this point that another strand of queer theorizing (in global politics and more generally) might provide helpful insight. In university faculty situations, inclusion is intimately bound up with success – success acquiring a job, success acquiring full-time labor status, success acquiring tenure, and successful contributions to the research, teaching, and service missions of the university. And we wouldn't want it any other way, right? In fact, most diversity coalitions sell diversity to administrations by arguing that the *best* faculty to contribute to the success of the university is a faculty that is diverse, and that's why 'we' need to look for diversity.

Some queer theorizing has interrogated the logic of automatically assigning normative value to success generally or particular notions of success specifically, arguing that, much like inclusion, assuming *only* positive normative value in success might be short-sighted and incomplete. For example, Jack Halberstam (2011) has made the argument that the queer is intimately acquainted with failure – failure to meet heteronormative behavioral expectations, failure to meet heteronormative familial expectations, and failure to conform with traditional social standards concerning romantic and sexual behaviors. Queer IR scholars have suggested that the queer has been homologized to 'failing', underdevelopment, and in IR theory (Weber 2014), in development studies (Weber 2015; Lind and Keating 2013), and in Security Studies

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This is especially important, I think, when we think about diversity coalitions that include adjunct labor

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See, e.g, discussion in the Murderous Inclusions special issue of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2013).

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(Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012; Sjoberg 2014; Weber 2002). Queer theorists interested in failure have argued that accepted notions of success “impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such,” determining *appropriate* paths, *appropriate* allies, and *appropriate* results (Edelman 2004, 2). In traditional terms of success (e.g., social foci on reproduction), however, the queer has always and already failed – and it has failed a failure that *by definition* deprives it of a privileged place in the hierarchies of global social and political life. In global politics, the foil to the reproductively unsuccessful, mal-developed homosexual is “the figuration of the ‘reproductive heterosexual couple’” which is “the logos of social and political development” (Weber 2015; citing Peterson 2014a; 2014b). Within this couple, “sex must be heterosexual, procreative, and most importantly, in service to the homeland” (Weber, forthcoming, citing Parsons 1966). The queer, on the other hand, “confounds developmental narratives of desire” (Weber, forthcoming, np) as well as social narratives of compulsory heterosexuality (Sjoberg, forthcoming, np). While this account of failure to meet traditional expectations is unique to the queer in international relations, accounts of failing to meet traditional expectations of masculinities, heterosexualities, whitenesses, class performances, and American nationalisms echo across diverse members of diversity coalitions. Models of success in university settings often (implicitly or explicitly) include ‘fitting’ in those models, and do not take account of either substantive or representational diversity.

But everyone wants to succeed. Diversity coalitions, like the universities they advocate to, value success – often even when that success functions to straightjacket the intellectual and pedagogical behavior of their members. Queer theorists have suggested that is because traditionally, when ‘success’ is juxtaposed against ‘failure,’ success becomes the only option, because ‘failure’ carries with it a connotation of normative evil (e.g., Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2011). Some queer theorists, noting this, have suggested an embrace of the alternative of ‘failure’ (Halberstam 2011). In this view, failure is not “a stopping point on the way to success” but “a category levied by the winners against the losers” and “a set of standards that ensure all future radical ventures will be measured as cost-ineffective” (Halberstam 2011, 174). Failure as a category serves to reinscribe and renormalize standards of ‘success’ which remain unchanged, unchangeable, regressive, and violent. In these terms, the unsuccessful people, and unsuccessful lifestyles not only *fail* but are *failures* – which become recursive when “we tend to blame each other or ourselves for the failures of the social structure we inhabit, rather than critiquing the structures ... themselves” (Halberstam 2011, 35, citing Kipnis 2004). In Halberstam’s view, it is the system that privileges a certain notion of success that is the problem, and failing within it is an emancipatory possibility which “dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live” (Halberstam 2011, 2). In this reading, the queer is outside of the consensus of inherited notions of success,

a positionality that “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development” (Halberstam 2011, 3).

For diversity coalitions in universities, there are two readings of the applicability of queer scholarship on failure. Both readings suggest that the systems that have been set up to determine ‘success’ among faculty members at universities are themselves (and in who they include and how) imbued with sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, racism, nationalism, classism, and resultant notions of appropriateness that deeply impact both the formation of diversity coalitions and their ability to make demands that improve diversity without (or minimizing) entrenching exclusion and its violences. The question, in my view, becomes what that means for diversity coalitions’ advocacy strategies. One reading suggests a radical deconstructionist view that advocates for the complete deconstruction of traditional understandings of how one succeeds in, and the privileges of success in, the profession of being university faculty. In this view, diversity coalitions are stopping short of asking for a total overhaul of how faculty life works, despite that being the only possible *full* break to systems of exclusion that they are fighting. While I am both normatively and politically sympathetic to this view, its radicalism is unlikely to sell to entrenched structures of power – risking alienating not only powerful allies, but members of diversity coalitions not fully convinced by the need to radically overthrow (or even benefitting from parts of) traditional notions of success. A radical disavowal of the notion of what it means to succeed in university faculties is unlikely to affect any immediate change (which is often necessary to keep together diversity coalitions, even when the immediate change is piecemeal), to find consensus among diverse elements of diversity coalitions, or to keep the attention of powerful allies.

A second reading, then, seems more appropriate for diversity coalitions interested in progress. This reading suggests that the queer recognition of the disciplinary function of success and failure *applied to* diversity coalition advocacy might provide a few directions for diversity coalition advocacy. First, diversity coalitions might consciously reformulate the ways that they measure *their* successes and failures in university contexts – moving beyond or adding to traditional measures of success that privilege powerful alliances and representational diversity to think about confounding traditional notions of what *we* want and how *we* get it. This might suggest a resistance to the disciplining and conformity that *comes with* inclusion, sameness, and same standards. This resistance does not mean *dropping* inclusivist agendas, it means *adding to* inclusivist agendas to critique traditional notions of who and what are included and by what standards. ‘Failing’ to discipline diverse faculty members into conformity with traditional standards, then, could be as desirable as ‘succeeding’ in including those people among the ranks of the faculty. Second, diversity coalitions might use the queer

critical interrogation of success and failure to frame interactions with powerful allies. Simply asking how we know that particular standards are appropriate, or how we know that particular minorities have particular needs, can start a conversation about how particular assumptions of what is good and bad in faculty members and for faculty members get started. In this strategy, using *queer critical logics* does not require either radical deconstruction *or* the use of inaccessible or alienating terminology – instead, these logics can be deployed as questions that help to trace traditional exclusions in universities, traditional struggles *within* diversity coalitions, and traditional difficulties *between* diversity coalitions and powerful allies. In other words, the queer art of failure provides a language for interrogating the imperfections of inclusion, assimilation, accommodation, and equality without losing a normative value of both representative and substantive diversity.

Queer Necropolitics

A third (and, for now, last) potential insight of queer theorizing for diversity coalitions' advocacy is to change the focus from *who succeeds* to *who fails* – from the potential beneficiaries of particular policies for inclusion, equal opportunity, equal treatment, rights, and accommodations to the actual victims of their (non)existence. This theoretical intervention comes from a growing literature investigating queer necropolitics – the queer politics of death and dying.

Briefly, queer confrontations in/with death have started to engage the necropolitical as a tool to bring into view “everyday death worlds” in global politics (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014, 4). If the traditional focus of diversity coalitions is to *improve* minorities' rights and opportunities, the focus of queer necropolitics is to *recognize* the pain, suffering, and even death that go on either as the result of ‘improvement’ *or* as a result of failing to engage in ‘improvement’ (or both). In global queer necropolitics, then, the centrality of death becomes a pillar of theorizing – which then serves to explore and understand violence, injury, and death at the margins rather than focusing the dynamics of success, improvement, and entitlement. In IR, research curiosities about necropolitics explore killability, killing, dying, and the dead rather than war victories, economic development, state stability, and institutional productivity.

For diversity coalitions in university settings, thinking about *what is lost* in current configurations of university faculties, and what might be lost in any (progressive or regressive) changes is a different, and ultimately more pessimistic, framing. At the same time, it has the potential to illuminate dimensions of exclusion, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, racism, classism, and nationalism that are often invisible in discussions about how to *make progress* rather than how to *redress loss*. Such an

approach can account for hybridity (that is, policies that both help and hurt people, or policies that hurt some people while helping others) more than current progressivist discourses can. Sympathy with suffering and loss can be a different tool for roping in the continued engagement of powerful allies than claims for equality. Focus on the pain and violence of exclusion, exclusive standards, and disciplining might also help diversity coalitions stay true to their goals *and* develop internal empathy across differences among coalition members. While, unlike queer necropolitics in global politics, there might be less of a focus on killing and dying,³ a theoretical framework that focuses graphically on pain, deprivation, and axes of violence might have the potential to ‘wake up’ both diversity coalitions and the universities that they speak to about the dire consequences of uniformity and conformity, and the complexities of escaping them.

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Though I often wish that the suggestion that neoliberal universities kill and cause dying (as slumlords, as militarized institutions, and through suicides related to inherited standards of success) was not viewed as radical and outside of permissible political discourses.

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