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Power Structures at Lafayette College and How to Combat Them

What is “power?” Why do some people have more “power” than others? How does “power” affect people? We have always lived in a society where everything is structured and grouped. We organized our lives into divisions of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, and so on. Through these divisions exist power structures where some people benefit more than others. For example, whiteness. Our world has been developed and structured to cater to the needs of whiteness, and thus, it holds power. Another example is the upper class. Our world rewards those who have money, inherited wealth, and a more than stable income. A last example is cis, heterosexual men. Our world rewards those of a particular gender and sexuality, granting them certain opportunities that allow them to have certain life experiences. Now, it is not always this black and white. There are other factors at play. But historically and generally, this has been the norm. With these categorizations or identities comes the power to do things and get away with it. The power over others. The power and privilege to exist without being criminalized, punished, or scrutinized because of your identity. Who decided who got the power in the first place? Why is a white, cis, straight, upper-class man the norm? Why is there even a norm?

In this paper, I will explore the different forms of power at Lafayette College and will also delve into how these forms of power can be contested through a transfeminist framework. I suggest that there are power structures within organizations on campus, such as athletics and Greek Life, within specific spaces on campus, like the bathroom and the classroom, and within specific identities, like race. I suggest certain solutions to help dismantle these power structures;

however, there needs to be a complete shift in mindset in order for these categorizations to hold less value. Throughout this paper, I will also weave in quotes from interviews in the Lafayette's Queer Archives Project, which honors the experiences of Lafayette's LGBTQ+ community through reflections of people who have lived the College's Queer history (QAP).

Power within Athletics:

In Kristen Berger's interview, a lesbian-identified alumna who graduated from Lafayette in 2015 and played softball, she mentions that there was no representation of the LGBT community on campus, especially in athletics. When she came out in her junior year, she said there were no resources for LGBT students at Lafayette besides the Quest office; however, she felt that going to that office was too visible for her liking. She said that there was no talk of identifying with the LGBT community and that those identities were silenced. When she came out, she was one of two openly gay athletes at Lafayette (QAP).

“But if you're not gay and in the closet, it's hard to say how important that silence is, how painful it is...The problem is there's zero support system and zero conversation.”

- Kristen Berger, Class of 2015

In Hil Malatino's piece, *Trans Care*, he talks about his pre-top surgery experience and how important it was for him to have a support system that actively showed love and care. He said that because people and institutions silence queer and trans voices, they have learned to create their own care webs and care for each other (Malatino, 2020). And that is what Berger did. She took it upon herself after feeling silenced by her peers and coaches to create the Respect Initiative, which aimed to not only end the silence surrounding LGBT identities but also educate coaches on how to create safer environments for LGBT students. It is important to be surrounded by people who you can call on for support; creating initiatives that allow LGBT voices to be

heard and educating peers and administration on LGBT identities helps to create spaces where people feel more comfortable and represented, helping to take away feelings of isolation.

Power within Greek Life:

In Daniel Reynolds's interview, a gay-identified alumnus, he discusses the heteronormative structure of Greek Life and the lack of representation of the LGBT community, as there was only one openly gay Greek Life member at the time. Reynolds mentions that he wanted to join a fraternity, DU, out of curiosity but was not accepted. He later found out that he was denied because of his sexuality. He discusses the difficulty of finding spaces to fit into at Lafayette because Greek Life dominated the social scene on campus (QAP).

“Do you want to be an outsider who's out of Greek life? Or do you want to be inside of the social system but closeted? It's just, yeah. It's a rock and a hard place.”

- Daniel Reynolds, Class of 2008

Greek Life reinforces the binary system and upholds notions of heterosexuality – it is separated into sororities, traditionally for women, and fraternities, traditionally for men. There are date parties and formals where there is an assumption that you will bring the opposite gender. In 1981, DU hosted a party called “Back to the Womb,” where the fraternity brothers made fun of women's bodies and issues relating to women's rights. According to the Easton Express, a local newspaper at the time, the basement of DU was made to represent the inside of a womb with red tissue paper over the lights, water balloons made to look like female breasts, and a giant replica of a used tampon. There were also replicas of aborted fetuses, and some of the men wore hangers around their necks to imitate self-induced abortions (QAP). The party themes are still gendered today, featuring themes like “golf bros and tennis hoes,” where the boys are expected to dress as the “golf bros,” and the girls are expected to dress as the “tennies hoes” or “gender

reveal,” where members are expected to dress in either blue, for boy, or pink, for girl. These themes reinforce existing gender stereotypes and the gender binary.

In his article “College Transitions: Recommended Policies for Trans Students and Employees,” Clark Pomerleau discusses the best practices for preventing sex discrimination against trans and non-binary students and employees. He discusses the importance of programs like Safe Zone, which allows students and employees to learn about LGBTQ+ identities (Pomerleau, 2012). At Lafayette, Safe Zone training is required for all chapters, which is a positive step forward, according to Pomerleau’s article; however, the system of Greek Life needs to be changed in order to make it a safer space for the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, the bylaws and constitutions of these organizations need to be updated with more inclusive language, the rhetoric surrounding date parties and formals needs to be changed so that it doesn’t uphold heteronormative ideas, and there should be organizations in place that work directly alongside chapters to create safer spaces for members who may not have come out yet, who are struggling with their sexual and/or gender identities, and for the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.

Power within Bathrooms:

Bathrooms are one of the most prominent examples of the reinforcement of the gender binary within society – it is a space that is divided into male/man and female/woman. In an interview with Leah Wasacz, a trans and bisexual-identified alumna, she discusses how the social climate on campus was not trans-inclusive. She talked about an instance where there was a vote in her dorm on whether or not to make the bathrooms gender-neutral, and one floor voted no (QAP).

“I mean, the bathroom issue was a big challenge. There were times where I got, I guess, I won’t say derogatory necessarily, but strange comments, for how I dressed. Because I wasn’t, and I’m

still not, passing. That's just something I deal with. Even people just having a judging sort of look.”

- Leah Wasacz, Class of 2016

In Julia Serano's *Whipping Girl*, she discusses cissexism, which is the belief that trans-identified genders are inferior to cissexuals. Cissexism often occurs when people attempt to deny trans individuals the basic privileges that are associated with a trans person's self-identified gender, like insisting that a trans person use a different public restroom (Serano, 2007). There is a power dynamic at play when one person believes and insists that another person does not belong in a space everyone has the right to use. Regulations requiring that men and women use separate bathrooms began in the late 1800s to protect women from the public realm. A woman's place was the home, and there was much reluctance to let them integrate into public life, so separate spaces were created (Rhodan, 2016). This same kind of discourse exists today when people push for anti-trans bathroom bills – they claim that there must be separate bathrooms for women and men because women must be protected. This completely dismisses trans identities and denies trans people the right to exist and live freely and safely within public spaces.

Clark Pomerleau also discusses campus policies regarding bathrooms and suggests that structural changes to buildings, like adding a sufficient amount of gender-neutral bathrooms, are crucial for making campuses more trans-inclusive (Pomerleau, 2012). Sex-segregated bathrooms only create more violence for trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming people. But gender-neutral bathrooms can help to take away the value associated with the gender binary and the value of the categories “man” and “woman.” They also can help to create more comfortable spaces and can help to minimize any potential mistreatment and violence those outside of the gender binary may experience.

Power within Classrooms:

It is established that professors are legitimate authority figures in classrooms, but sometimes, that power is wrongly and inappropriately exerted on students. In an interview with Bryan C. Fox, a trans-identified alum who graduated in 2010, he discusses an instance where one of his professors, whom he highly respected and loved, abused his power and called students hurtful names during class time (QAP).

“It was rough. Like, he told one student they were wrongly named. He told one student something along the lines of they won’t make it through med school or...he called me this before I transitioned...he called me a dildo girl...I remember sitting in Farinon after the class, and I just felt sad. Like, I just felt this sadness.”

- Bryan C. Fox, Class of 2010

Not only is this blatantly disrespectful and derogatory, but it is also ignorant of what someone may be experiencing at that point in their life. Fox explains that, at the time, he was still trying to figure out who he was as a person and that he was still bothered by his professor’s words ten years later. In Bobby Noble’s *Trans/Forming Feminisms*, he describes how difficult it can be to self-name or self-define yourself (Noble, 2006). We are expected to mold ourselves to fit into existing categories like man or woman because that is the norm. But not everyone fits into that norm. And trying to find your place in the world can be a tedious and emotionally draining process.

Power within Identities like Race:

Lafayette is a predominately white institution, and for a person of color, it can be difficult to find a sense of belonging or feel as though you are being represented. Bryan C. Fox expresses this in his interview, saying that there was a lack of support for the LGBTQ+ community and for people of color on campus (QAP).

“So, having being multilayered, and especially marginalized identities...I had already dealt with oppression, being viewed as a “lesbian...” Being viewed as a black and Latino lesbian female at that so... I understand what it was like to be marginalized...because we had the racial stuff that was going on here, too, and there’s some very privileged students that are Caucasian, white...”

- Bryan C. Fox, Class of 2010

In “Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans* Feminism Meet: A Conversation,” with dialogue from Kai Green and Marquis Bey, we hear about the relationship between Black feminism and Trans feminism and how each can supplement and relate to one another. Mainstream feminism, tailored to white women, leaves out both trans people and people of color. But, by using both a Black feminist and a Trans feminist framework, which both refuse the gender binary, racialized sexism, anti-Blackness, trans-antagonism, and other hegemonic structures, we can decenter the white hetero-patriarchy while also bringing to the forefront Black trans voices (Green & Bey, 2017). On campus, to highlight black trans voices, we could have students learn more about black queer and trans history and implement classes that specifically focus on topics like Black Trans Feminism. We could also implement more resources that specifically focus on and support Black trans students, like counseling services where staff are educated on Black trans experiences or delegating funding to LGBTQ+ groups.

How to Dismantle These Forms of Power:

In order to challenge these existing power structures, we need to shift the way we are thinking. We need to work from the ground up. In *Black Trans Feminism* by Marquis Bey, they posit a world without categories by using Black Trans Feminism as a means to get there. We place too much value on identities, and they are forced upon us, as Bey discusses. Normativity is coercive and nonconsensual and only allows you to show up if you adhere to it (Bey, 2022). By

taking away the power that some identities hold and taking away that forceful nature of identities, maybe we can create a world with much less violence.

Certain steps can be made at institutions like Lafayette to make the campus more inclusive, like the addition of gender-neutral bathrooms or the addition of more education programs about LGBTQ+ identities; however, the problem of power still exists. And that is not to say that these steps are not important because they do help with representation, bringing awareness to certain issues, and changing the way institutions operate, but, again, the root of the problem still exists. The way that we contest power still relies on the existing categories that contribute to the violence that those outside of the norm experience. As Bey said, we need to live in a world that never presumes who we are or who we will become (Bey, 2022). We need to live in a more free world. A world that doesn't tell us who we can or cannot be. A world that doesn't force us to fit into a mold in order to be seen. It is unknown what this world will look like or how we will get there. But I think this is a world that is necessary in order to take away the power and privilege that some identities have over others.

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