Your Tax Dollars at Work: The State of Queer Youth Studies

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On 12 October 2007, I received an email from the chief media officer at SSHRC, which let me know that a reporter for the *National Post* was writing an article on my research. My response was "sounds great!" I was thrilled by the coverage, although a bit confused as to why a generally conservative periodical would be interested in profiling my work on LGBT youth cultures. Robert Fulford did attempt to contact me, but I wasn't able to return his call until the deadline had already passed. When the article appeared, my reaction was, "Oh." I got it. The article wasn't about my research—it was about "people like me" (i.e., the oft-cited special interests groups) who suck money from the Canadian economy for "pointless" scholarship.

I am, indeed, part of a "special-interest" group. I am especially interested in the continued survival of LGBT youth around the globe who may feel invisible when they turn to popular culture for any sort of ethical representation of their lives. After Ricky Vasquez on *My So-Called Life* (1994), teen audiences had to wait seven years until the arrival of Marco Del Rossi on *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001) to see anything close to a "realistic" portrait of a gay teen. I am interested not simply in charting the development of literature and media aimed at gay teens, but in collecting and analyzing work written *by* gay teens. Scholastic has an imprint,

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Push, edited by David Levithan, which solely publishes teen novels and poetry. Why isn't anyone else writing about this? Scholars will admit that the gay memoir—particularly of the Edmund White variety—"had its place" in the development of LGBT literature, but what about teens writing now about their experiences of homophobia versus their attempts at community building? Hundreds of teens write letters to publications like XY, which is then criticized because it includes sexy pictures of gay youth. Why are recollected sex-scenes by older gay men considered academically interesting, while teen participation in visual sexuality today is considered exploitative and scholarly vapid? Are teens too stupid to construct themselves as objects of discourse, or as cultural organizers? The growing emergence of gay-straight alliances in North America seems to suggest the opposite.

Academics are supposed to be ornery and polemical—we're supposed to like arguing—but it's not often that we get the chance to respond, in print, to an outright attack on our scholarly and cultural lives. So I'm going to use every bit of my one thousand word limit here to make a point. I am sick and tired of being called a pampered doll because I work in queer studies, as if LGBT research has become so mainstream that any attempt to address its marginalization is now pointless and reactionary. I completed six years of graduate work at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia—supposedly one of the most queer-friendly cities on the planet—and during that time I was one of only three openly gay students within my department. I was never given the chance to participate in or TA for an LGBT studies class, since none existed. I was consistently told that I should "broaden my focus" and "not just deal with queer issues." I attempted to start an LGBT grad student network and was met with almost perfect apathy from the school's graduate community. I watched numerous tenure-track positions appear, but none that focused on queer studies or, even, on sexuality in general. I received generous and unqualified support from my supervisor, but aside from that, I felt adrift.

I am tired of being told by colleagues, by publishers—and even by strangers—that queer studies are passé, that they're already well funded, that they don't require further attention, that I should just shut up. Every day I try my best to identify as a queer man who's never entirely sure where his politics lie, who's not completely certain what he wants to "do" with this cultural capital, but who *knows* that there's something heinously wrong with a world where fifteen-year-old Lawrence King gets shot in the head in Oxnard, California, for admitting that he has a crush on his classmate; a world where the murders of LGBT youth go largely unreported unless

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a celebrity such as Ellen DeGeneres takes an interest in them. There's something so, so wrong when I actually find myself reading *Perez Hilton* for current gay analysis, rather than *GLQ* or *The Advocate*, because I feel so few people in the academy actually care anymore about addressing the intersections between race, sexuality, and youth. Jasbir Puar's 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages*, for instance, is one of the first to discuss the role of racism, particularly Islamophobia, as a constituent force within gay middle-class political movements. The death of young queers has become incredibly powerful as a politically mobilizing force today, but it has also become a cry emerging from white gay men at the expense of other global communities. And it remains a sad fact that most middle-class gay white men that I meet are either pathetically apolitical, casually conservative (anti-poor, anti-welfare, pro-military), or openly cavalier about the racism that undergirds their belonging within a "radical" sexual community.

I grew up in a small town which necessitated silence around my queerness, and so my sense of "belonging" to a global queer community has always been complicated by my earlier need to pass as straight in order to survive. Whenever I write, in whatever medium, I am writing for an LGBT audience, particularly a younger audience. Yes, the language in my articles can be dense, but as a gay kid I read all sorts of weird and complicated texts—I read everything that I could get my hands on. I will always write within a bizarre tension between dismantling what I see as antiqueer sentiment in the academy and mobilizing the queer support directed at me from positive channels. My cv is a funny-looking thing, because I like to conjoin different areas—fantasy, pop culture, sexuality, television, literature. I'm as proud of my book on Buffy the Vampire Slayer as I am of my dissertation, or my forthcoming volume of essays on teen superheroes and subcultures. When I teach, I look for the quiet, hesitant students who seem to always hover around an unasked question, and I keep them in my vision at all times. I believe, as bell hooks intimates in Teaching to Transgress, that it's possible to create a kind of loving dialectic within the classroom without denigrating scholarly analysis—love informs our textual readings, as it informs our pedagogical moves, and love has every place in both academic writing and responsible teaching. Part of that means having to say, again and again, how I love, who I love, and what that has meant along a political continuum.

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