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2020-2021

Article

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8-24-2021

## Representation Matters

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### Recommended Citation

Robinson, Cori H. (2021) "Representation Matters," *The Mall*: Vol. 5 , Article 5.  
Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol5/iss1/5>

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## Representation Matters

Cori H. Robinson

So, let's break this down. "Studies show that gender identity actually develops quite young – before kids begin school, around the age of 3-5 years old" (Mayo Clinic). Many people often think that kids are too young to be able to choose their gender identity when really, a child can start to form their perception of their gender before they enter preschool. Societal pressures such as color classification, and gendered toy and clothes marketing puts more pressure on children to conform to a specific gender early on in their life. Having discussions with one's child early in their life about LGBTQ+ representation will help to grow our society into a more accepting community. The past shapes the present, which builds the future of the feminist movement. Having an open mind about LGBTQ+ representation is the first step in recognizing the importance of their inclusion in the feminist movement. Inclusivity will guide our society towards better representation of its members as well as a more accepting and loving community.

The first wave of the feminist movement first started in 1848 and lasted until about 1960. It mostly focused on voting rights, educational rights, property rights, temperance, and abolition. The most notable event from the first wave feminist movement is the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1920 which allowed for women to be able to vote. The gender binary, gender expression, and gender identity were all terms that were not yet introduced in the first wave of the feminist movement. Specifically, lesbians in the first wave were not recognized or talked about. If lesbians were not recognized in the first wave, imagine what it must have been like to be a trans person during the first wave. There have always been queer people throughout our history, but they were never talked about because they were seen as different from what society thought a normal person should be like. One of the main ways that trans folk could express their gender identity back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was by cross-dressing. Crossdressing was even introduced during the 1920s in the first-wave feminist movement for feminists such as Amelia Bloomer who advocated for women to stray from traditional long dresses and skirts to more pants-like outfits. However, it is and was not easy back then for trans people to quietly transition without anyone noticing even more so than it is in the present time. According to *Transgender History, The Roots of Today's Revolution*, "The colony of Massachusetts first passed laws against cross-dressing in the 1690s" (Stryker 46). Heteronormativity was not defined during this period; however, it was prevalent. The assumption that heterosexuality is the norm makes all other sexualities seem lesser than or "different" compared to the "normal" assumption that everyone should be heterosexual. Additionally,

during the first wave, there was an issue with homophobia and xenophobia.

White supremacists would consider homosexuals as well as people of color to be impure. “White supremacy imported homophobia into the civil rights movement, specifically using gay-baiting tactics to discredit the movement and generate white supremacist fears of sexual and therefore racial impurity” (Enke 548). The intersection of race, ethnicity, and sexuality was used interchangeably during the first wave by white heterosexual men to promote discrimination amongst a community that was seen as “different”. Heterosexuality was privileged over any other form of sexuality during the first-wave feminist movement and is still privileged today during the third-wave feminist movement.

After the many hardships of the first wave, the second wave feminist movement focused on including women of color and liberating women from their traditional ways of life such as staying at home to take care of their families. The second wave focused on social and political equality as well. The term patriarchy was used more frequently from the 1960s to the 1980s. The term was introduced as a way of organizing a society that privileges men over women. This especially proved difficult for people who were a part of the LGBTQ+ community. When popular feminists like Betty Friedan were publishing feminist works that are homophobic, it made it more difficult for queer people to want to be included in the feminist movement as a whole. For example, “Most particularly, she “uncritically embraced Freud and other homophobic discourses,” and she “never assumed other than that childcare was primarily a mother’s responsibility” (Levine 42).

Given how famous *The Feminine Mystique* was, one can understand why queer people were angrier during the second wave. Contrary to the many disappointments of this movement, there were also many victories. The Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the reproductive freedom provided by the *Roe v. Wade* case paved the way for a more equal society. Gloria Steinem (among other powerful women as well) was one of the most influential activists of the second-wave feminist movement. Unlike other white cisgender activists, Steinem advocated for the rights of LGBTQ+ people as well as women of color. She understood that people who were a part of the queer community needed to be included in the feminist movement for it to progress. An event that was especially beneficial to LGBTQ+ inclusion in the feminist movement was the uprising at Stonewall Inn in New York. Stonewall was essentially a haven for people part of the queer community to go dance, drink, and have fun without fear of judgment. It was often raided by police who arrested people for not wearing the “correct” attire. One night that started one of the most important movements during the second wave was the night that the queer community fought back. According to one person from that night, “One young gay Puerto Rican went fearlessly up to a policeman and yelled in his face, “What you got against faggots?! We don't do you nuthin!”

Another teenager started kicking at a cop, frequently missing as the cop held him at arm's length. One queen mashed an officer with her heel, knocked him down, grabbed his handcuff keys, freed herself, and passed the keys to another queen behind her" (Duberman, Kopkind 14). The Stonewall Inn riots became a catalyst for a new generation of political and social activism. Marsha P. Johnson was one of the most influential figures of the gay liberation portion of the second-wave feminist movement. After the night of the riot, Johnson and another transwoman named Sylvia Rivera started the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) group. This organization helped to keep young trans kids off the streets and out of jail. Additionally, the two trans women who started the group worked to provide housing for young trans and queer children and helped to provide education that had been interrupted by discrimination. People and organizations created during the second-wave feminist movement helped to shape the way we as a society include and represent individuals who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

From the 1980s to the current 2000s the third-wave feminist movement has been taking action to combat further gender stereotypes. So far, it has focused on placing an emphasis on intersectionality and not rejecting traditional expressions of "femininity". Gender resistance feminisms have also come into play during the third wave. Liberal, Marxist, and social feminisms were ideas that shaped feminist theory. Intersectionality has been a term that has been frequently used when discussing third-wave feminist values. It can be defined as an intersection of different oppressions that work together to produce injustice. For example, a queer black woman is statistically more oppressed than a cisgender white woman. Oppression is not singular. Systems of oppression are encoded in laws, policies, and media that affect our lives. On the other hand, socioeconomic status and class affect oppression as well. Different people who have different socioeconomic statuses benefit from certain types of privilege. It is all dependent on how we use our privilege to be accomplices towards marginalized groups. For example, people who identify as cisgender could use their privilege to advocate for people who are part of the queer community. A recent event that helped promote further liberation of people part of the LGBTQ+ community was the Supreme Court ruling of legal same-sex marriage. Until this law was passed my uncles had to wait 10 years before they could legally marry. To me, that seems like an absurd amount of time to wait to marry your best friend when straight people have been able to do so freely for hundreds of years. According to *Men Explain Things to Me*, "gay men and lesbians have already opened up the question of what qualities and roles are male and female in ways that can be liberating for straight people. When they marry, the meaning of marriage is likewise opened up" (Solnit 58). People who are homophobic do not support gay marriage mainly because they believe it to be untraditional, and that one of the main purposes of marriage is to have

children. Cisnormativity is something that is not representative of the third wave, and we as a community need to recognize that. The term can be described as thinking that being cisgender is the only “right” way of expressing gender identity and prioritizes this over any other gender expression. These societal norms are becoming less and less progressive as society becomes more liberal; however, these norms are still second nature to us as they are still presented in the media, social beliefs, and politics.

The most important step we can take to include LGBTQ+ representation in our lives is to educate others on the importance of inclusivity. Recently, some high schools have started to implement queer history around the country, but why stop there? There should be queer representation in elementary education as well. My theory is if we as a society can start to slowly implement queer history in early education, there will be more opportunities to include LGBTQ+ people in our society with the next generations to come. One state that has been making large strides towards inclusivity is California. There is a summer camp that is specifically designed to be a safe space for transgender kids. “In fact, being transgender is so unremarkable here, when I asked Gracie what makes it “special,” she shrugged and said: “You get to do fun stuff” (Brooks). Having a place where there is no judgment or discrimination is likely to improve the mental health of transgender youth. Having the ability to feel included and valued in friendships can also help LGBTQ+ youth practice better social skills needed later in life for making important career connections. As important as it is to include queer history in our children’s lives, it is even more important to educate the youth on what it means to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community. According to *Teaching LGBTQ History and Heritage*, studies have shown that “any mention of LGBTQ people or issues in the curriculum increased student safety and improved the climate for students” (Rupp, Crawford-Lackey).

One of the main reasons why we should teach LGBTQ+ history is that it promotes an atmosphere that is free from bullying, harassment, and discrimination against youth who are part of the queer community. It is important to show how sexualities and genders differ across the world and in different countries, traditions, and cultures. Even music can help educate others on what it means to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community. For example, one of the first albums that introduced the idea of inclusivity in its music had a song called *Free to Be . . . You and Me*. “It provided an affirming narrative to boys who did not conform to dominant, heteronormative standards of masculinity” (Rotskoff 277). Intersectionality plays a vital role in shaping our world’s history and its future. Reforming the school curriculum to not only add but transform the ideas and actions that were a part of queer history will promote better welfare for everyone.

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