HETEROPRIVILEGISM: THREE LAYERS OF DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES THAT TARGET NON–HETEROSEXUAL SUBJECTS

Michael Crowhurst
The University of Melbourne

Abstract
This article outlines a model for unpacking some of the layers that comprise discrimination on the basis of sexual preference. Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Grosz, I suggest that there are various layers that constitute 'heteroprivilegist' contexts. There is nothing particularly new in the naming of these layers. The layers that I use here, the homophobic, the heterosexist and the heterocentric are used widely across the literature. I have noticed a tendency on occasion however for writers to situate their work in only one of these layers. I felt that there was a need for a generic term that could be used to convey this sense of layering.

Michael Crowhurst currently teaches in the Education Faculty at Melbourne University and in Health Promotions at Deakin University. He also works with whole school communities around issues of sexual diversity. Michael recently completed his PhD through the University of Melbourne.

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Introduction

A few years ago, I was asked to be involved in a training program focusing on issues to do with difference and school culture. I was invited to facilitate a discussion focusing on lesbian and gay school experience. The training program was ironically entitled: 'We Don't Discriminate We Treat Them All the Same' and was an attempt to explore the many ways that cultures of learning are not neutral spaces but rather are sites that are often embedded with values that may disadvantage some students (Crowhurst, 1998). Elizabeth Grosz's writing is very useful in unpacking the way that values can come to be embedded in cultural contexts.

Grosz, writing about how values are embedded in knowledges, outlines a framework that delineates 'the range and scope of misogyny' (1988:92). While she focuses on academic disciplines, particularly the humanities, the framework is also useful in identifying and categorising misogyny, as it is evident, in other discourses. Essentially, Grosz suggests that misogynist values are evident in discourse in a layered fashion, with some layers being more obvious than others, and that this in turn is an effect of knowledges being produced within contexts that are similarly embedded with misogynist values.

Grosz identifies three layers of misogyny which she names sexist, patriarchal and phallocentric. Consider her definitions which are quoted at length below:

- . . . **sexism** within knowledges consists in a series of specifically determinable *acts of discrimination* privileging men and depriving women. By 'acts' here I mean propositions, arguments, assertions, methodologies — discernible textual references to women or femininity. Sexism is a manifest phenomenon, easily illustrated, for it ranges from the open expression of hostility or suspicion about women to ignoring and excluding women altogether from being considered worthy or relevant objects of investigation. Sexism is the *unwarranted* differential treatment of the two sexes. (1988:93)
- Above and beyond particular acts of sexist discrimination, **patriarchy** constitutes underlying structure regulating, organising and positioning men and women in places of different value and with differential access to self-determination. Patriarchal oppression provides a context, structure, support and legitimation for the various sexist acts of discrimination. (1988:94)
- **Phallocentrism** is the abstracting, universalising, and generalising of masculine attributes so that women's or femininity's concrete specificity and potential for autonomous definition are covered over. It is thus more difficult to locate than sexist or patriarchal commitments for it renders female autonomy and self-representations impossible and conceals alternatives. It operates as a condition of possibility for statements, methods, axioms and judgements and cannot be so readily illustrated by concrete examples as sexist or patriarchal models. It is a theoretical bedrock of shared assumptions that is so pervasive that it is no longer recognised. (1988:94)

Grosz proposes that misogyny is evident in discourse in layered and in complex ways. At one level, there is discourse that is obviously sexist, not only in the sense that it positions women as 'less than' men but also in the sense that this positioning is easily identifiable. When a male P.E. teacher, for instance, says to a group of boys: 'You're playing like girls', he is accessing a discourse that is obviously sexist. He is *speaking a discourse* that is embedded with values that seeks to position women and men within a series of power relations that privilege men and that disadvantage women and, in doing so, he also seeks to access a subject position that offers him the privileges that flow to all men within patriarchal and misogynist cultures. It is important to note that I am not suggesting that he does all of this consciously. The discourse that he speaks into being has at some stage been learnt and, like all that has been learnt, can become unconscious after a time.

It is also important to note here that his speech does not appear out of thin air and that, in some senses, it does not emanate from him alone (see Dwyer, 1989:63). When the P.E. teacher accuses the boys of 'playing like girls', he accesses a discourse that establishes a relationship between himself and a community of sexist subjects who have preceded him (see also Butler, 1997:80). His words are not his invention, they are a social product uttered in a social context and they have a history that he connects with as he uses them. That doesn't mean that he is not responsible for his actions, it rather suggests that there is more to minimising sexist discourse than targeting the individuals who speak it into being. The cultural contexts that produce such discourse must also be targeted and the historical dimensions that enable such discourse must also be acknowledged.

So, as well as being embedded with values in a layered fashion as Grosz suggests, all speech acts, or other forms of discourse for that matter, whether they be racist, sexist, homophobic or not, have a history, and in many ways exceed the actual speaker or do-er. Judith Butler, in *Excitable Speech* (1997:80), writing about racist discourse makes this point very clearly:

> The racial slur is always cited from elsewhere and, in the speaking of it, one chimes in with a chorus of racists, producing at that moment the linguistic occasion for an imagined relation to an historically transmitted community of racists. In this sense, racist speech does not originate with the subject, even if it requires the subject for its efficacy, as it surely does.

Grosz argues that sexist comments, like those made by our fictional P.E. teacher, are structurally supported in that they only make sense within contexts where boys are discursively positioned as better than girls. She uses the term 'patriarchal' to name this layer of misogyny and suggests that sexist social practices are both enabled by, and an effect of discourses that are embedded with patriarchal values.

Discourses, for instance, that position women and girls as incapable of holding certain positions because of their sex, are patriarchal and, in turn, enable the generation and the reproduction of sexist social practices as well as a rationale or justification for such actions.

The third layer of misogyny that Grosz elaborates is far more subtle and insidious. The layer that she labels 'phallocentric' permeates discourses in a manner that is so subtle that it is often unnoticed. The notion of phallocentrism suggests that unexamined and unmarked places within culture are subtly gendered, in that they are often unconsciously assumed to be male.

When the author of a text is automatically assumed to be male, for instance, this is both an effect of phallocentric discourses and an example of phallocentrism as it is evident within discourses. The phallocentric is perhaps the most difficult layer of misogyny to work against because it is the most subtle and the most difficult to recognise.

The notion of 'phallocentrism' (as with other 'centrisms') also draws attention to the way that discourses are subtly embedded with values that position certain categories of subjects as 'different' and other categories of subjects as 'the norm' — and further, it

alerts us to the importance of not only working to identify discourses that 'other' but also to the importance of identifying discourses that ever so subtly construct 'the norm' (see Britzman,1995:151-165; Martino, 1999:138-149).

Some Implications

In drawing attention to the layered ways in which values can inhabit discourses, the importance of working for the achievement of cultures that might be open to all kinds of diversity in layered and in multiple ways is made evident. When the P.E. teacher accuses his class of 'playing like girls', for example, Grosz's framework suggests that not only is there a need to rupture such discourse by naming it as sexist and responding to it in obvious ways but that there is also a need to unpack the obvious and subtle structural factors that support and enable such comments to be generated in the first place. There is a need to work against such moments in multiple ways (Grosz 1988:102-3).

Butler's idea regarding the 'historical' dimensions of acts of speech also highlights the importance of creating new forms or patterns of discourse in the hope of re-fashioning the future — and further, make it very clear that speech acts always exceed the speaker.

Grosz's (and Butler's) ideas are very relevant to many other areas where individuals are working to support diversity or to limit discrimination of whatever kind.

Appropriating Grosz's Framework — Heteroprivilegism

Grosz's framework is a very useful way of thinking about many types of discrimination and I should like to appropriate it here as a way of thinking about discrimination as it occurs around non-heterosexual sexualities. I will focus on discriminatory, limiting or oppressive discourses (where discourse is understood to include a diverse array of social practices (see Misson, 1996:118-21) that target non-heterosexual subjects or those presumed to be other than heterosexual and that, simultaneously (but in many ways unsuccessfully), seek to position heterosexuality as privileged.

This is not intended to suggest that those who identify as heterosexual escape being targeted by such discourses nor that such discourses are only reproduced by subjects who identify as heterosexual. Nor am I intending to suggest that the 'privilege' that such discourses seek to position heterosexuality with is without its own considerable downside. [I will return to this theme after I have outlined the model.]

As I have indicated above, at the time that I read Grosz's framework I was struck by how incredibly useful it was. I was aware however that there wasn't a word, that I was aware of, that functioned in the way that misogyny did around gender to discuss questions of sexuality. There was a need for a word that would serve as an umbrella term to bring together (appropriating Grosz's framework) the existing concepts of homophobia, heterosexism and heterocentrism (or heteronormativity).

I also thought that this was a useful strategy for other reasons. In my experience, there is a tendency in some of the literature around same-sex attracted young people to focus on either homophobia, heterosexism or heteronormativity. A new word would allow for a focused discussion of one of these layers but simultaneously convey that there is more to it than the particular level that is the focus of the discussion.

Further, a new word was needed to convey (again appropriating Grosz) some sense of the layering involved. This word could communicate a sense of layered complexity and could also provide one way (certainly not the only way) of making sense of that complexity while simultaneously implying the necessity of working in multiple ways around this issue. The word that I have coined to meet these ends is a rather long and clumsy one that doesn't roll off the tongue easily. The word that I have coined is **'heteroprivilegism'**.

Heteroprivilegist discourses 'privilege' heterosexuality — and simultaneously seek to limit the expansion of non-heterosexual sexualities — in subtle and in obvious ways. Heteroprivilegist contexts are those that are embedded with values, that may facilitate the reproduction of social practices that are, in turn, heteroprivilegist.

Following Grosz's lead, and following the literature, I suggest three layers of values and I label these: **Homophobic**, **Heterosexist** and **Heterocentric** (see also Miller and Mahamati, 2000:49). These are the layers that are evident in contexts that I would name heteroprivilegist. I will draw on the comments of same-sex attracted secondary school students that I interviewed for a project that I have recently completed (Crowhurst, 2001) in order to illustrate these layers.

The Homophobic Layer

There is no single definition of the term 'homophobia' (see Telford, 1997:9). Here, I use it to describe conscious or deliberate actions that target or position people who are same-sex attracted (or who are assumed to be) in limiting in discriminatory or in violent ways. I also use it to refer to limiting social practices that target same-sex attracted people as a category or type.

'Homophobia' is an effect of social practices, that are embedded with homophobic values that are enacted within social contexts, that support the reproduction of such practices (see also Emslie, 1999). Religious, medical and legal discourses, which have been generated within social contexts that are embedded with values that position same-sex attracted people as evil or as unnatural or as abnormal, are some of those that have historically, and into the present day, sustained or generated homophobic social practices. These same discourses have also generated homophobic attitudes and ways of thinking and being that have become very deeply embedded in many people.

There are many limits to the usefulness of the term 'homophobia' which are discussed by Telford (1997:9-12) and Glynn (1999:65-7), one of the main being that, in using the term 'phobia', there is recourse to discourse that positions 'homophobia' as a problem that an individual has — and that an individual generates — and in the process the structural factors that actually produce it are ignored or erased (Beckett, 1996:13-14; Hinson, 1996:242-3). And further, Glynn (drawing on the work of Telford, Misson and Hinson) also highlights that the positioning of expressions of violence as effects of a 'phobia' can mean that the actions of individuals who are violent towards others become, for some sections of the community, somehow excusable (Glynn, 1999:65-7; see also Marr, 1999:53-71).

Glynn coins the term 'homocontempt' (1999:65) as an alternative and, drawing on the work of Connell, suggests that documented accounts of harassment, violence and economic discrimination are evidence of a contempt for same-sex attracted people that is deeply embedded in the discourses through which gender is constructed within many Australian contexts (for discrimination see also NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, 1982; Gay Men and Lesbians Against Discrimination, 1994; Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, 1997; Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2000). He suggests that this term more accurately describes the texture of oppressive discourses that target same-sex attracted people.

In the end, however, he decides to stay with the term 'homophobia' as it is widely used within 'social justice' discourses and this is where he situates his work (Glynn, 1999:65). With Glynn I have decided that the term homophobia, with all of its limitations, enjoys a certain degree of currency and I will use it as a label to name the first and most obvious layer of discourses that I am naming heteroprivilegist (for a related discussion see Wyn and White, 1997:137).

One participant (Dante) provided an interesting example of a same-sex attracted person (himself) enacting homophobic discourse. This example is important because it illustrates that discourses that are embedded with homophobic values can be accessed by young people who identify as same-sex attracted as well as by those who identify as 'straight'. It illustrates that homophobic discourse is not only enacted by people who identify as straight against those who identify as same-sex attracted. It illustrates that discourses that are embedded with discriminatory values can impact, in very negative ways, on everyone — be they same-sex attracted or not.

Dante (17, Catholic boy's school, Year 12 bisexual) described a situation where he had used homophobic discourse as a form of self protection:

> D: When I was in year 10, I got suspended from school for calling a kid a poof out of a bus window — and he was an 'effeminate' kid, so ummmm . . . Because he was an 'effeminate' kid and because he'd been called gay so many times, he went and dobbed and I got suspended . . . I thought that was really good . . .At the time I thought it was fucking ridiculous . . .
>
> I: And so when you call other people poof . . . What are you . . . ?
>
> D: Trying to save yourself because I'm gay and they won't think I'm gay because I'll give them a hard time . . . Just detracts attention from yourself and puts it onto someone else . . .

The extract also highlights that homophobic discourse, as it is enacted, can target people who are suspected of being same-sex attracted because of the way that they are constructing their gender and that, therefore, such discourse limits the potential of everyone (not only same-sex attracted subjects). In fact, I would argue in concert with others that limiting the expansive potential of all bodies is what such oppressive and 'reactive' discourses are about (see for instance Grosz, 1995:215).

Primarily, however, I want to focus on subtlety and obviousness here. Dante's actions represent one layer of heteroprivilegist discourse that is very easy to detect and seemingly easy to manage. It is important, however, to return to the words of Butler quoted earlier and to remember that the discourse that he enacts is not his own and that, in many ways, it exceeds him. Similarly, interventions that aim to curb such behaviour must be mindful of the necessity of not only targeting the speaker but of taking on a much broader aim as well.

The Heterosexist Layer

Homophobic discourse is supported by and enacted in tandem with, and through, heterosexist discourse. Heterosexist discourses subtly assume, or in some cases overtly state, that to be straight is to be better than to be same-sex attracted (see, Beckett, 1996:13-4). Sexuality Education programs, for example, that consciously position heterosexuality as the norm, or that refuse the inclusion of same-sex perspectives for whatever reason, are heterosexist (as well as perhaps homophobic). Heterosexism supports and frames homophobia, in that homophobic discourses only make sense within contexts where homosexuality is positioned as 'less than' heterosexuality and where heterosexuality is positioned as more powerful than, or better than, homosexuality.

The line that separates homophobic and heterosexist actions, however, is blurred in the sense that discourse that is heterosexist is also simultaneously homophobic. Discourse that privileges heterosexuality as natural, for example, is both heterosexist and homophobic, in that it simultaneously positions homosexuality (either explicitly or by implication) as unnatural.

It was actually very difficult to locate specific examples of heterosexist discourse in the participant interviews (see also Mills, 1999:105). Most of the heteroprivilegist discourse that the participants encountered fell into the categories of homophobic or heterocentric discourse. There weren't any examples that readily come to mind where young people were explicitly told by a teacher or a peer that to be heterosexual was to be better than to be same-sex attracted. So while I was able to find many instances in the transcripts where same-sex attracted sexualities were discursively positioned as 'less than' straight sexualities in various ways, these discourses were not mirrored with others that sought to explicitly position straight sexualities as 'better than' the rest.

Heterosexist discourse is, however, often evident in religious discourse that seeks to perpetuate a hierarchy of sexualities where heterosexuality within marriage is positioned as the only acceptable or fully realised expression of sexuality (see Epstein and Johnson, 1994:212-3; Marr, 1999). While many of the young people who participated in this study attended religious schools, and I would have assumed had encountered or been exposed to such discourse, none of them referred to such encounters. It would appear that, if they had in fact been exposed to such discourses, they had rejected or forgotten them.

Perhaps James (15, inner city, State co-educational secondary school, identified as gay) came the closest to an encounter with overt heterosexism. He described a situation where he asked a teacher to include gay and lesbian perspectives in the History course he was taking but was told by his teacher that this was not viable. The teacher did not say that this couldn't be done because of a personal problem that he had with same-sex

sexualities but rather suggested that the curriculum was overcrowded and that, as there were not enough students who would be gay or lesbian in the class (and who would therefore be interested in such material), the inclusion of such material would be unwarranted (for a relevant discussion see Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1996:63-5). According to James, same-sex perspectives were not deemed to be a priority. Consider his comments:

J: None of the subjects have any gay topics. I don't think any subjects...touch on gay and lesbian students or experiences at all . . . but . . . I have brought the topic up but the teachers said: 'No we don't want to discuss it because there's just not enough gay and lesbian students'. . .

I: So who did you bring that up with?

J: I brought it up with my History teacher last year and he said: 'We can't because we don't have enough time to talk about it or even touch on the subject'. . .

I: And so when he said there weren't enough gay and lesbian students . . .

J: I think he was getting into the percentage of gay and lesbian people in society since there's only about 10% . . . He didn't think that percentage was enough . . .

I: How did you feel about that? Were you happy about that?

J: I'm not happy about that at all. I think we should be studying gay and lesbian subjects or that we should be touching on homosexual subjects within each subject or . . .

James not only draws attention to the fact that the subject content that he encountered was embedded with certain values that prioritised heterosexuality but he also draws attention to the fact that subject content is very much a social product that comes about as a result of the work that teachers and students do in classrooms. Subject content (as feminist theorists have been saying for decades now (see Davies, 1993:1994) does not exist in a realm outside of cultural influence — it takes shape and is generated within cultural contexts and, in many instances, comes to reproduce values that are evident within those contexts.

James' comments indicate not only how heteroprivilegist subject content can be rejected and resisted by young people but also how young people, *via* their demands of teachers and through the assignments and essays that they write, are in some cases challenging classroom cultures that may generate heteroprivilegist knowledges and taking the lead in the production of new knowledges that are not heteroprivilegist. James' comments indicate that young people are sometimes engaging in radical work.

His comments (as well as offering an example of heterosexist discourse) also draw attention to the importance of thinking not only about the necessity of including GLBT perspectives in subject content but also to the importance of reflecting on the factors that govern the production of knowledges in classrooms — which mean that such perspectives are often omitted in the first instance.

The Heterocentric (or Heteronormative) Layer

The heterocentric/heteronormative layer is the third dimension that constitutes heteroprivilegist discourse (for ‘heteronormative’, see Seidman, 1994:130). The term heterocentric or heteronormative refers to values that are subtly embedded within discourses as opposed to homophobic and heterosexist values which are more easily detected.

Heterocentrism is evident in what is ***not*** said as much as it is evident in what ***is*** said. The often unexamined assumption, for instance, that a person is heterosexual is an example of and an effect of heterocentric discourse (see also Beckett, Tweed and Fisher, 1999:262; Crowhurst, 1999:170-1; Epstein, 1999:30-33; Letts, 1999:98). Discourses that are embedded with heterocentric values are also at work in contexts where heterosexuality is privileged into presence and where same-sex attracted subjects and sexualities are subject to discourses that subtly seek to render them silent and unseen.

Heterocentric or heteronormative discourses function in tandem with homophobic and heterosexist discourses and, while they subtly contribute to the positioning of same-sex sexualities as ‘other’, their main contribution to heteroprivilegism is the way in which they subtly construct heterosexuality as the unexamined norm against which sexual difference is labelled and then subjected to regulatory discourses (see also Warner, 1994; Britzman, 1995:151-165; Martino, 1999:138-149; Sumara and Davis, 1999:192-3, 202; Mac an Ghaill, 1994:155, Nayak and Kehily, 1997:152).

The question of intent is important to emphasise here, because it is intent that distinguishes homophobic and heterosexist discourses from heterocentric ones. Subject content, as has been discussed, that consciously or deliberately privileges heterosexuality is heterosexist and homophobic. Curriculum committees, educational bureaucracies and writers of subject content that make conscious decisions to ignore the inclusion of same-sex perspectives while they permit the inclusion of heterosexual perspectives, for instance, are acting in a heterosexist or homophobic manner (as well as unprofessionally and unethically). Heterocentric discourses, on the other hand, are different, in the sense that they are not the product of conscious choices. The term ‘heterocentrism’ is intended to refer to moments where privilege comes to be embedded in discourse in an unconscious fashion.

The notion of heterocentrism illuminates the importance of taking on board the deeply embedded nature of values both within discourses and within people and, therefore, of the necessity to work for change not only in multiple ways but in a layered fashion as well.

When I asked Kelvin (15, co-educational State school, identified as gay) whether he had encountered any gay or lesbian content in any of the subjects he had studied at school, he replied:

K: No, none at all.

I: So can you remember any instance at all, either in your primary school or in your secondary school, where gay and lesbian content . . .?

K: No. . . Oh . . . Just recently we had this Student Welfare Program or something.

I: And what was that all about?

K: They came into school and they discussed anger management and stuff like that and they had one thing in relation to gays and lesbians and it was just 'Can you tell a gay or lesbian just by looking at them?' and everyone thought 'Yes'.

I: The whole class ? *[laugh]*

K: Yes *[laugh]* and that's all . . . that's it . . .

I: That was this year?

K: Yeah.

I: And how long was the gay and lesbian part of that?

K: Just 5 seconds . . .

I: Just 5 seconds . . . So that would be the only mention that you've heard of gay and lesbian people in subject content?

K: Yeah . . .

Kelvin does not report that he encountered discourse in the form of subject content that told him that to be same-sex attracted was evil or unnatural, nor does he report that he encountered discourse that explicitly suggested that to be straight was to be better than to be same-sex attracted. He has, however, encountered discourse in the form of subject content during his time at school that has usually (unconsciously) positioned same-sex sexualities as 'other' and that has (again unconsciously) constructed the central, normative place as heterosexual. I make this assumption because he is so clear that he has only ever been exposed to 5 seconds of queer content.

Other participants spoke of similar or related situations that illustrate the notion of 'heterocentrism'. Violet (16, 7-12 co-educational state school, bi-sexual) for example, spoke of heterocentric discourse as it was evident in school texts and videos that were used within the sex ed program she had encountered at school (see also Hiller, *et al.,* 1988:4-5; Crowhurst and Emslie, 2000:42-3). Again there is nothing in these materials that communicates an explicitly homophobic or heterosexist message, but the video as a form of discourse, is embedded with values that privilege heterosexual perspectives as central and that marginalise same-sex perspectives nevertheless. Consider Violet's comments below:

> The main focus is on puberty, which would be affecting most people at that stage anyway, and reproduction and that follows heterosexual issues . . . And the little cartoons have little males and females running around together and the little male watching the little female's breasts bounce around [reinforcing the idea that this is] normal, [that] this is what should be happening to you, *[loudly]* that this is what WILL happen to you [and] if something else is going on, well it's not on this video and so you should think that there is something wrong.

Kelvin and Violet offer examples of heterocentrism which is the more subtle layer of heteroprivilegist contexts or discourse and perhaps the most difficult to work against.

A note on 'privilege'

As I have indicated in the abstract, I have coined the term 'heteroprivilegism' to serve as an umbrella term to convey a sense that discourses (that social practices) which seek to limit or oppress sexualities which are not heterosexual function and are embedded with values in a layered fashion. I would now like to problematise my use of the term 'privilege' in this context.

In 2000, The Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby published a report entitled *Enough is Enough*. The report is based on information provided by 929 people who describe themselves as members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities in Victoria (VGLRL, 2000:1). The report details many instances of discrimination. The report also details that, in the area of superannuation, for instance, LGBT people currently do not enjoy the same rights as heterosexual people under Federal Law.

If you are LGBT in Australia at this point in time and in a relationship with a partner of the same-sex, you do not have the legal right to direct your superannuation entitlements to that partner. Heterosexual people do have this right. This is one example of how heterosexuality is currently favourably positioned within legal discourse and is clearly an example where being heterosexual carries a substantial financial privilege. Coining a term that draws on notions of privilege seems to be highly appropriate in this instance.

However, the privilege that accrues to heterosexuality, or those presumed to be heterosexual, within heteroprivilegist contexts, in many other ways exacts a substantial price and couldn't accurately be described as bestowing any 'privilege' or advantage at all.

The price that heteroprivilegism demands, I would argue, is the requirement that, in order to access the 'benefits' of this regime, the subject must accept a certain loss of autonomy and, in the process, willingly accept to take up and take on the limits that such an oppressive regime demands (see Foucault, 1991).

So, while it is true that in some ways that there are rewards which accrue to heterosexuality, these are qualified. In the end, nobody benefits from the oppressive and reactive discourses that I am naming heteroprivilegist and that is why it is important that we all work in layered ways to bring about change in this regard.

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