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“Being Gay in Anti-Gay Poland:

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Research question and approach

This paper considers the development of political activism in response to the strong and pervasive anti-gay, lesbian and transgender policies initiated by the government in Poland since 2005. There is a rich scholarship documenting such activism, most of which relies on social movement theory, in which activists are viewed as pursuing their interests through public repertoires of protest and visibility, framing their claims strategically in response to the state as well as the “public.” This paper argues that a “social movement” approach is inadequate in capturing the possibilities of this activism and that an approach drawn from an alternative political context, Black diasporic trans theory, may be more fruitful. Since Poland’s political space is dominated by the Nation as a reference point, even activism that challenges nationalism is shaped by it and thus integrates its assumptions; in contrast, in Black diasporic trans theory, nationalism becomes just another element in the hierarchies that limit all human possibility outside of hierarchy. While it is unusual to use an approach developed in light of one very specific historical experience to analyze another specific experience and context, the contribution of this paper is to explore what an approach that is life affirming without reinforcing conditional subject positions can offer the study of societies in the grip of nationalism.

The paper pursues this exploration in three sections. It first presents social movement theory as it has been used to analyze politics in Poland generally and gay activism in Poland specifically. In doing so, social movement theory’s assumptions about how activists are positioned in relation to their claims and the state are highlighted. The paper then develops the significance of the Nation as a structuring discursive symbol in Poland in particular, a referent that social movement theory views as a “frame” but which is better conceptualized as an enduring discursive regime. In other words, the paper uses a Foucauldian approach to discuss the difference between a manipulable “frame” for political issues and a shared reference point that structures which frames are legible and legitimate. In the third section the paper considers the case of a gay and lesbian campaign arguing for inclusion and uses Black diasporic trans theory to reveal its inability to transcend the position as an outsider that the Nation assigns to it.

In developing the conversation between gay activism and trans theory, the paper does not describe the full landscape of gender variant and non-heteronormative public expression in Poland. There is already a large literature documenting this expression. Instead, the paper presents different approaches taken by scholars and different approaches taken by activists and theorists of social change, juxtaposing them using one example.

In analyzing activism in Poland, I have consciously chosen to use the term “gay” to refer to non-heteronormative subject positions, and practices, activism and arguments supporting gender variance. I am aware that “gay” has come to mean cis males and is considered by many to exclude

lesbian, bisexual, transgender and other non-straight identifications. It is also often opposed to “queer,” a term that can include non-normative gender (rather than sexual) expression, such as non-binary. The most important scholars on this topic—Agnieszka Graff, Phillip Ayoub, Jon Binnie, and Connor O’Dwyer—use “LGBT” or “LGBT+.” For example, Łukasz Szulc writes, “The Polish LGBT movement is obviously more gay than queer. Its politics are predominately based on the ethnic/essentialist model, which assumes that all homosexuals share a natural desire for people of the same sex and, because of that, face discrimination in society” (Szulc 2016 [orig. 2011] :166). Szulc is not alone in asserting the qualities of gay activism in these terms. Many other observers oppose “gay” to “queer,” equate gender variance to “homosexuality,” and reduce gay life to sexual desire.

There are two reasons to choose to use the term “gay.” First, in Poland the right-wing government has, since 2015, appropriated “LGBT” to create a reductive, dehumanized label that stands for an imagined foreign ideological justification for pedophilia. This government and its allies find that the letters together that make up “LGBT” are easier to connect to an “ideology” than reference to real human beings. The acronym, having originated in the U.S., also makes it easier to position its referent (be it a gay pride parade, a curriculum on tolerance, or a person) as the product of foreign or “Western” influence. Thus, to keep it clear when the state’s use of “LGBT” is under discussion, this paper avoids “LGBT” to refer to lived experiences and material culture (such as a rainbow flag). Instead, it uses “gay” as an inclusive signifier for gender variance and non-heteronormative sexualities, that is, practices and identities outside of cis, heteronormative, state-sanctioned requirements for social relations.

Second, the categorizations used in the Szulc quotation above are no longer sustainable in gay and queer theorizing. Scholars writing from a range of global contexts note that gender is not a quality of a person, but a system of assigning value (see, for example, the collection in Rosello and Sangupta 2014). “Gender” manifests so differently and is subject to so many variations that the state and other cultural authorities go to considerable lengths to police it, or at least incite it. In parallel, “sexuality” is not reducible to a sexual act, a specific object of sexual attraction or a bounded set of practices. In other words, a strict division between what is “gay” and what is “queer,” between what is “heterosexual” and what is “homosexual,” is not supportable. To be fair, Szulc’s main point was that Polish activists themselves use descriptions that are “essentialist” and subscribe to the categories of “homosexual” and “gay.” However, the approach taken in this paper does not adopt these self-descriptors (which themselves may be simply strategic) and interprets them as a response to a rigid state-imposed gender regime.

“Contentious Politics” in Poland: Gay Activism as a Social Movement

Over the past five years Poland’s nationalist, right wing government, led by the Law and Justice Party, has positioned gender variance as a central threat to the state and nation. It has created and continues to create a collection of policies, laws and practices that are tied together by reference to this carefully constructed enemy to Polish family life. Partly a moral panic and partly an attempt to mobilize voters, the anti-gay campaign has resulted in an extraordinarily hostile and violent environment for anyone vulnerable to the label, “LGBT.” This rhetoric and these policies are so pervasive that instances occur almost daily. A typical example is a June 2020 speech by President Duda, campaigned for re-election, where he directly stated that gays and lesbians “are not regular, normal people” [“oni nie są równi, normalnym ludziami”]. In the same month a Law and Justice Member of Parliament claimed, “LGBT are not people; it is an ideology.”

Many in Poland have responded with activism. This activism has been organized and expressed in a number of different modalities. Street protests, marches, video campaigns, social media, public placards and posters, and legal challenges—the repertoire of responses to anti-gay repression is varied and plural. Recent protests (April 2021) use “dajcie żyć!” [let us live!] as their slogan to highlight the increase in violent attacks on gay people, both protestors and non-protestors. Most of these street protests use rainbow colors to symbolize that they are fighting for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights. This slogan is a response to the violence during the summer of 2020. An election campaign together with encouragement from the Law and Justice government created a climate in which organized violence against protestors increased. At an August 2020 protest police arrested a non-binary activist, Margot, for vandalizing a vehicle from which counter-protestors had threatened to harm those protesting.

Scholars have largely analyzed gay, lesbian and trans activism in Poland through the lens of Tilly and Tarrow’s well known approach to “contentious politics.” In this lens, resistance to governmental policies is described as “claim-making” (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015: 11). People gather, organize and pursue coordination actions, such as those listed in the previous paragraph, to voice demands from the government and in the process to express (and sometimes form) identities. In other words, people demand change from the government but also make claims about themselves and who they are. In this lens it is crucial that activism be visible to the state. Visibility itself and the forms in which people present themselves publicly as visible agents of change is the condition for government to “see” activism. While Tilly and Tarrow do not conceptualize “visibility” separately from public performance of claims-making, scholars building on their approach to analyze gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender activism pull out “visibility” as its own subcategory of claim making. Since gender variant people have historically been pressured to hide who they are, visibility is itself a claim. Furthermore, as will be developed below, in this lens activists and their supporters position “visibility” as the necessary first step to the goal of full and equal inclusion in the polity.

For this paper, I propose an alternative approach to analyzing gay, lesbian and trans activism. Relying on another body of scholarship— cultural studies approaches offered by diasporic transgender theorizing, and Black trans theorizing in particular—I elaborate and extend the concept of “visibility” to show that it functions differently than the “contentious politics” approach would have it. Instead of an instrument of claims making and instead of a stage in the pathway to full inclusion in the political order, for diasporic, Black trans theory visibility is itself an expansive exercise in “world-making.” Here, “visibility” is not subject to the requirements of successful activism, that is, provoking a response from the state or helping the heteronormative order “see” gay people as fellow citizens; instead, visibility is a changeable, fluid mode of being in a specific setting such that categories of citizenship are themselves disrupted. Further, Black diasporic trans theory reveals, in its commitment to world-making outside of state-sanctioned citizenship categories, that mainstream gay activism in Poland positions itself as requesting inclusion and thus reinforces the discursive regime in which full subjectivity is authorized conditionally. This complex alternative to “contentious politics” merits careful elaboration, which I offer in the pages that follow.

“Contentious Politics:” the Interests and Identities Approach

The emergence of gay and lesbian activism (sometimes called LGBTQ or LGBTQ+ activism) has led to a growing scholarly literature concerned with how best to assess its success and impact and how to explain its prevalence in some global contexts and not others. In this general approach gay,

lesbian, bisexual, transgender and other gender-variant or non-normative public claims for rights and other aspects of citizenship is considered another iteration in the successive waves of demands for voice that we find in democracies. In other words, gay activism is just another form of all social activism. Thus, the assumptions at work in the social protest or activism literature is transferred to public claims made in gay, lesbian and other gender-variant terms. These assumptions center on “interests” and “identities” as the most important concepts driving explanation.

Recent work by Ayoub, Page and Witt on the 2019 gay pride march in Sarajevo is an excellent example of this work (2021). Using public opinion data and surveys the authors found that the march had multiple effects: those in proximity to the event increased their support for not only gay people in Bosnia but for the activism itself; however, respondents not in proximity to the event or to someone mobilizing for the event remained subject to social currents of homophobia. The success of activism is judged according to the “attitudes” of those outside of it, including the state.

Ayoub, Page and Witt’s study draws from the influential activism research by Tilly and Tarrow in their 2015 book, *Contentious Politics*, itself drawing from Tarrow’s approach emphasizing social openings for activist demands to be heard.¹ Because Tilly and Tarrow hoped to develop an overarching theoretical approach to social protest, they used concepts at a very general level—concepts that would apply to any context. They viewed protest in its essence as “claim making,” conducted through collective rather than individual action, and affected most strongly by the response of the state. Tilly and Tarrow assess protests according to their “dynamics,” which at times means whether a specific campaign transforms into a long-lasting social movement and at other times refers to how activism changes its modes, public form or content (the claims demanded) as it interacts with government (or is ignored). They call this latter dynamic “framing.” For example, the U.S. protests against universities’ investments in South Africa took the form of on-campus mock “shantytowns,” but according to Tilly and Tarrow, the shantytown form was a “failed innovation” (Tilly and Tarrow, referring to Soule 1999, 2015: 43).

This “claim making” approach positions the state as crucial actor. The state’s actions prior to protest can open up “opportunity structures” in which protest may succeed; the state can also react coercively and impose high costs on activism (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015: 49). Their conceptualization of the state is intentionally general, to enable comparison across cases. For these authors, states are important because of their vulnerability to the threats symbolized by protest; their capacity to make rules limiting how claims can be legitimately addressed; and their monopoly on violence, that is, use of police (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015: 8-9). In all these ways, the state can offer an alternative frame to undermine activist claims.

Three main assumptions in the “contentious politics” approach have carried over into more contextualized studies of activism in Poland and gay, lesbian and trans activism. First, these studies tend to assume that activism is “claim making,” that is, activists have interests they wish to advance. Second, the forms their protests take—including visibility and aesthetics—are determined by the “dynamics” of the interaction between activists and the state. In other words, protests take shape as a process, reacting to and sparring with the government. Third, once claims have been addressed, contained, redirected or repressed, the mobilization for activism is similarly muted. However, an

¹ Although the citations in this paper are to the 2015 edition of *Contentious Politics*, the text and its concepts appeared in 2006; in addition, the approach itself draws on Tarrow’s earlier work. Thus, these assumptions about social activism have influenced the scholarship on this topic since the early 2000’s.

“identity” may remain. Thus, “identities” are forged in the public arenas of confrontation, through the mixture of interests, state response and public expression.

One example of how these assumptions are reproduced in the literature on Poland is the work of Kubik and Ekiert, two of the main scholars on social activism in that country. In their 2001 volume, *Rebellious Civil Society*, Kubik and Ekiert compare instances of collective action, first under state socialism and later in the years immediately after the collapse of Communist Party rule (Kubik and Ekiert, 2001). They helpfully contextualize activism by introducing the condition of “culture,” which in the Polish case, according to these scholars, functioned under late state socialism to create a powerful shared “counterhegemonic vision,” allowing for a widespread, unified anti-state stance under the banner of “Solidarity” (Kubik and Ekiert 2001: 159). The Communist Party from 1976 to 1989 faced not a single group of mobilized activists but a vast, interconnected network of people who accepted and circulated the symbolic universe in which the state was illegitimate. After the collapse, this symbolic universe was no longer legible—it had no reference, an illegitimate state—and the democratic processes that replaced it were experienced by people in Poland as unstable, overly fractious and generative of uncertainty (Kubik and Ekiert 2001: 162-64). These authors find that in the early years after the transition to the neoliberal political order, activism was comprised of economically-based claim making, accompanied by periodic protests inspired by elite rhetorical campaigns.

Turning to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender activism in Poland, Connor O’Dwyer’s work extends the “contentious politics” approach and its assumptions further as well (O’Dwyer 2018). O’Dwyer compares gay activism in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania to trace the correlation between the degree of social conservatism (and intolerance for gay citizenship) and the strength and capacity of that country’s activism. In a sense, O’Dwyer reconceptualizes Kubik and Ekiert’s “culture” as widely shared attitudes toward gender variance (although he does not explicitly refer to their work). He also extends Tilly and Tarrow’s concept of “framing.” Activists express their shared claims within frames. But alternative frames for the same claims—such as gay rights—can be generated socially to counter activism. O’Dwyer ends up finding, in Poland at least, that socially conservative attitudes meant that gay activists fighting for “rights” faced off against a state and society that framed homosexuality as “a threat to national identity and moral codes” (2018: 22). Both become even more highly mobilized by this competition. Activism begins as a fight for full citizenship but ends up as a fight for a frame.

The Enduring Narrative of “Nation” in Positioning Gay Life

As O’Dwyer documents well in his important book, “hard right,” conservative political programs had been gaining steam in Poland throughout the post-1989 period. The accession to the European Union in 2004 bolstered the divide (seen as crucial by O’Dwyer) between pro-EU, pro-Western political parties and socially conservative parties who instrumentalized the EU as an enemy of traditional values. By 2015 this right-wing collection of parties had matured into the Law and Justice Party alongside smaller coalition partners. Law and Justice continued its anti-EU and traditional values stance, but also increased its attacks on gay life, using the term “LGBT” to refer to any person, practice or space that was not gender or hetero-normative.

O’Dwyer as well as Ayoub and other scholars seek to track support for gay activism through public opinion or attitudinal surveys. However, it is likely that views held by individuals responding to surveys do not necessarily emerge from long-held beliefs or cherished values; they may, instead,

reflect back ideational material circulating publicly at the moment in time under study. Furthermore, this ideational material can be infused with emotionally charged references, adding urgency to a specific “attitude” or “opinion.” In other words, social support for or criticism of gay activism may be the *result* of a political climate in which these discourses proliferate. This dependence of “public opinion” on a wider climate is perhaps best seen in historical instances of “moral panic.”

Attention to the ideational environment in which political views are expressed is common in studies of politics in Poland, but less common are crucial distinctions among highly charged rhetoric, the actual decisions of political parties mobilizing such rhetoric, and the enduring narratives that people rely on to explain past and present. As noted earlier in this paper, Law and Justice deploys anti-gay rhetoric surprisingly often. It also has passed anti-gay legislation and initiated anti-gay policies. Yet the long-term dominant narrative that gay activists must contend with in Poland is a specific conceptualization of the nation that transcends the existence of Law and Justice.

The power of the sign, “the Nation,” in Poland’s political history has been well documented and theorized. It is linked with Poland’s geographical position in Europe, which has changed over the centuries but has consistently situated it as vulnerable to incursions of its territorial sovereignty. The territorial entity, Poland, as not only suffered military invasions but persistent attempts by international organizations to influence its domestic politics. This sense of vulnerability seems to have persisted over time through the various political elite formations, movements, and political platforms that have emerged. Thus, rather than a very general “culture” or a set of “attitudes,” the vulnerable-yet-strong Nation is best viewed as the dominant reference point organizing political space in Poland. For those who wish to invoke it as justification as well as those who studiously avoid mentioning it, it is always present and forces all political actors to grapple with it.

This conceptualization of nationalism draws from Rogers Brubaker, although it is not a perfect fit with his “nationalizing nationalism” (Brubaker 2004 [orig. 1996]). He writes:

Nationalizing nationalisms involve claims made in the name of a “core nation” or nationality, defined in ethnocultural terms, and sharply distinguished from the citizenry as a whole. The core nation is understood as the legitimate “owner” of the state... Despite having “its own” state, however, the core nation is conceived as being in a weak cultural, economic, or demographic position within the state. This weak position ... is held to justify the ... “compensatory” project of using state power to promote ... the specific interests of the core nation. (2004: 3)

All of these elements are present in post-communist Polish nationalism: a core ethnicity, a sense of possession of the state, a simultaneous sense of vulnerability that propels policy. It must be said that Poland does not truly fit what Brubaker has in mind, the new state that must nationalize and thus generate nationalism. However, it has been redrawn over and over, territory added and subtracted. In other words, Law and Justice is not the source of Polish nationalist rhetoric in the twenty-first century. It is reiterating and re-energizing a familiar narrative about ethnic Polish citizens under attack, who can only respond via nationalism—either aligning with it explicitly or rejecting it.

In regard to post-1989 social demands, this specific type of nationalism means that the “core nation” is always positioned to be at risk and demands to join in its privileged position are treated as incursions into the national body. The discourse of incursion, resonating with the material, violent incursions of the world wars, is so pervasive that it generates anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim and anti-

ethnic minority formulations, even when no actual persons claiming these identities are present. While Poland actively pursued European Union membership in the 1990s and early 2000s, by 2005 the EU was seen as violating Poland's sovereignty. While no Syrian refugees petitioned to enter Poland during the Syrian refugee crisis, politicians created new anti-refugee campaigns (Górak-Sosnowska and Molodikova 2018). Since the weakness of the core nation cannot be changed, the "compensatory" element of this logic finds expression in repeated campaigns of this sort. As Agnieszka Graff and Elzbieta Korolczuk point out, anti-gay rhetoric on the part of the government is a form of engagement with a foreign enemy that keeps their supporters vigilant and fearful (2018). Although Graff and Korolczuk view this rhetoric as stemming from recent stresses of globalization rather than the national compensatory project, they convincingly demonstrate the importance of a foreign enemy for Poland. Demands for inclusion are considered threats to the ways of life that constitute this core nation.

Note that this conceptualization of the Nation as a charged sign structuring political discourse by requiring all other subjectivities to emerge in relation to it is different from conceptualizing nationalism as "constructing" nationalized or "national" identities. In this approach only the core nation claims true access to a coherent identity that can be integrated into the polity. While it appears that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and expressions of gender variance are themselves coherent identities that exist prior to the Nation, in the Foucauldian discursive regime identities do not exist prior to discourse. In addition, identity is never fully "constructed;" it is always a negotiation with those forces authorizing specific subject positions. "Gay" and "transgender" are claims to personhood that are located outside of the Polish core nation (itself ethnic, Catholic and heteronormative) and are always contingent, no matter how successful the activism.

The Nation as referent, with the associated dynamics of core nation and compensatory projects, interferes with the smooth logic of the social movement approach. This type of nationalism is more than a state responding with a "frame" to activists' claims. It functions differently than a frame, in that it is neither manipulable nor a strategic political move to silence a group. It is, instead, truly the ground on which belonging is defined. There is no alternative frame that can contest it. Moreover, it is not sustained by a particular political party or a particular attitude toward, for example, gay people or refugees or Jews.

Transgendered World-Making: Diasporic Travels in Trans Worlds

The "queer" critique of gay, lesbian and bisexual activism and theorizing has been occurring for quite some time. To simplify, this critique finds gay, lesbian and bisexual activism to be overly normative; the pursuit of inclusion into the "normal," pre-set categories of citizenship is essentially conservative and replaces one set of exclusions with another. Social movement theorizing reinforces the problems with gay activism because it only recognizes those protests that fit within its conceptualization of what activism is: claim making that uses frames and repertoires legible to state and society. In other words, the gay activism acknowledged *as* activism by the "contentious politics" approach has already altered its shape to be less "queer" and more gender normative.

There are many queer alternatives. Most have in common the desire to create solidarity and community without reference to the need for inclusion in state-sanctioned categories of gender expression, social identity, sexuality, or aesthetics. An example many theorists and activists use is marriage. Most states position a marriage contract as a condition for other contracts and access to resources and status (Brandzel 2005). States such as Poland explicitly preclude gay marriage in their

constitutions to withhold access to this status from individual seeking to marry someone of their same sex (Szulc 2011). Given its ties to privilege it is no surprise that activists seek it out as a right or claim. Marriage is also a specific way of being in the world, with legal and cultural requirements, and is a symbol of having achieved mature intimacy as well as social permission to have children. Queer critics challenge marriage as a goal because of the normative baggage it carries, especially its function as a gateway to “real” romantic partnership. As Lauren Berland and Michael Warner note in their pivotal essay on this topic:

we want to promote as the radical aspirations of queer culture building: not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture (1998: 548).

Other significant authors who have extended the connection of “queer” with the creation of possibilities outside of the authorized, normative include Lisa Duggan (1994), Leo Bersani (2009) and John D’Emilo (2014).

In the past decade theorizing from transgender ways of being in the world has tightened the focus introduced by the authors above to a more careful demonstration how even a queer identity can be a foreclosure of possibility rather than a radical alternative. The risk in adding “Q” to “LGBT” is that queer becomes another identity, assumed to be pre-discursive and positioned as outside of “normal” citizenship categories, asking to be let in. Indeed, as “transgender” (to give one example of an “identity” viewed as “queer”) was taken up as part of gay activism, its content as an identity became the subject of scholarship (Valentine 2007; West 2014). In contrast, scholars such as José Muñoz directed their attention to the specific visual forms in which people who were deemed “transgender” (or claimed that name) and noted that these visual forms went far beyond the desire of activists to be seen as citizens (1999). The theatricality, performativity and camp of some artists as they deployed highly gendered forms in public performances seemed not to reinforce identity but instead to use excessive identity references to comment (and subvert) on identity itself. In parallel, Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification” was applied by cultural studies scholars to a range of forms that seemed natural but that could be de-naturalized by noting their over-compensation, including the nation (D’Cruz 2021).

Black trans theory, and especially Black diasporic trans theory, entered this line of scholarship to interrupt the use of identity itself. While there were many precedents, Saidiya Hartman’s 2007 book, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, was crucial, I would argue. Hartman revisited North American and European enslavement practices to foreground their effects of displacement and silencing; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries individuals were kidnapped, wrested from their home communities, and terrorized by slave traders—both Black and white—such that any knowledge of where a person had disappeared to was unavailable to family or wider kin. Those kidnapped and deported themselves did not know the names of the waystations prior to boarding the slaving ship. In subsequent centuries in North America and elsewhere the system of slavery extended this denial of a past community and any inheritance at all—including a name. People were renamed, often arbitrarily, their biological children, parents and loved ones re-deported. Since rape by enslavers, those working for them, and others was commonplace, the documentation of lineage was problematic for the documenter. Fathers’ names were left blank or were taboo to utter at times as a way of refusing the reinscription of sexual violence in the family archive. Hartman writes that

slaves “were dead in the social world of men” (2007: 67). This was a death so extreme that it was not to be mourned or even recorded.

Hartman does not describe people who were enslaved; she is describing the structure of enslavement. She notes that it has an afterlife, in which inheritance continues to be elusive, improvise and marked by erasures. Scholars writing in the vein of Hartman note how this denial of humanity via a denial of heritability continued to find expression in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It also requires individuals to create their own bonds of belonging. For example, Tiffany Florvil finds Afro-German women in Germany had to create their own communities, their own political spaces, and their own terms of belonging in the 1970’s and 1980’s (2020). The problem faced by those deported, scattered and enslaved (and their descendants) is not that their “identity” was not recognized, nor that they were not visible; it was that the afterlife of the slave system continued to define them as permanently excluded from full citizenship.

Black trans theory finds this denial of heritability to be present in the state’s sexuality regimes as well. It is the case that there have been successful campaigns for the acceptance of transgender children and adults in many localities across the globe. It is also the case that many transgender activists do consider “trans” to be an identity and make claims for rights via this identity. However, Black trans theory steps outside of these projects and positions itself elsewhere. In the face of unreliable and manipulated archives (meaning that the record cannot be trusted), this theorizing develops an inventive, creative form of knowledge-making that—in line with other writing by Hartman—is “speculative” and a type of “fabulation.” Lives are imagined on terms that do not stem from social norms or state-sanctioned contracts. Belonging, community, safety and closeness are fashioned from lived experience but not limited to it. Social relations and the physical, biological and cultural bodies that pursue those relations (including gender expression and sexuality) can include what is imagined. As Jayna Brown writes, “Surely our desires have some bearing on what individualizes us—shapes us as discrete bodies as opposed to fairy dust...But sensations also mark the ways our bodies are open. The body, the self, is porous, receptive, impressionable, and not so easily individuated” (2021: 14). Tavia Nyong’o clarifies the link between Hartman’s historical method and Black trans theory’s extension of belonging on its own terms:

... [I]t is the very exception of blackness and queerness from the humanist standard that produces the possibility of imagining humanity otherwise...If we are ‘not yet’ consistently accorded human status, if we remain an enigmatic shadow cast over the human project, then the shape of the humanity that we might envision would be wholly different from humanity as we know it today (2018: 25).

While it may be jarring to use theorizing developed in a very historically specific moment—the Middle Passage—to analyze gay activism in a very different historically specific moment—Central Europe in the twenty-first century—what Black diasporic trans theory demonstrates that other approaches to social relations do not is first, the hierarchical violence always already embedded in any social category but not visible, and second, the specific form this violence takes when addressing sexual subjects, that form being the denial of genuine belonging. Sometimes this denial is the denial of belonging in the human family; sometimes it is denial of kinship and belonging in a family network; sometimes it is denial of a past; and sometimes it can be a denial of the capacity for intimacy itself (Macharia 2019). The project of life-making has to occur, then, on its own terms, outside of and regardless of the contestation of identities and via the truth that these capacities are self-evident.

The Case of the Campaign against Homophobia

It is common in scholarly treatments of gay activism to note patterns by which activists seek to present gay life as “normal,” drawing criticism from others in gay activism who aim to expand self-expression and gay life beyond the “normal.” Indeed, the social movement approach discussed above routinely assumes that “inclusion” is the main goal of gay activists, sometimes worded as “civil rights.” In the U.S. this tension was expressed in controversies over Bruce Bawers’s *A Place at the Table* and Michael Warner’s response in *The Trouble with Normal*. In many international settings (including the U.S.) this tension fueled the exclusion of transgender and non-binary forms of expression and ways of life from activist movements, in the belief that these forms carried an excess of “difference” that could not be accommodated into the “normal” polity at large. Transgender and other voices contested this exclusion. They argued that gay politics has the potential for wider liberation from rigid categories that oppress all people; it should not be limited to equal civil rights.

More recently, in the U.S., the U.K. and European Union countries this tension has been analyzed through a critique of neo-liberalism. The neo-liberal project that has swept the globe brought with it highly structured possibilities in terms of individualism, private ownership, self-actualization and personal striving, often only accessible through highly administrative or legal pathways (Spade 2011). Articulated best in David Harvey’s book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, elements in this assemblage of values are the “civil rights,” equality and inclusion referenced above (Harvey 2005). Many scholars view the pull toward “normal” in gay activism to be a simultaneous pull into the neo-liberal regime (Spade 2011; Binnie 2013; Sikora and Majka 2021).

The assumption that gay protestors in a democracy want to be included as full, equal citizens has implications for how “visibility” is interpreted by scholars of activism. For social movement theorists, “visibility” is not only crucial but its forms are important to how claims are “framed.” Simply put, protest must be public and move the specific claims demanded forward. If gay activism seeks integration into “normal” citizenry, then “visibility” must carry that normalcy symbolically. Szulc presents the example of an early (failed) campaign in Poland titled “Let Them See Us” (2016 :167); Anna Gruszczynska directly argues that Pride marches have inclusion—via visibility-- as their overt aim (2007). Thus, “visibility” is in the service of the pursuit of inclusion.

The most mainstream and widely known gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender effort is the “Campaign Against Homophobia.” The Campaign Against Homophobia was founded by Robert Biedroń, a well-known politician and the first openly gay person to win a mayoral election in Poland, who currently serves in the European Union Parliament and ran a nation-wide campaign for the presidency in 2020. The Campaign Against Homophobia has created several nation-wide initiatives and has a strong social media presence. It also very directly presents a case for neo-liberal inclusion. Because of this, many journalists and scholars have analyzed it, at times positively, at times critically (Jartyś 2017). Rafał Majka, for example, argues that the priority on civil unions (gay marriage is prohibited in the constitution) and the right to create families in the Campaign Against Homophobia is ultimately discriminatory itself. The Campaign’s most well-known and controversial initiative was a series of billboards depicting two same-sex individuals who culturally present as a “couple.” They are calm, subdued, and holding hands. The goal was to use the highly visible form of a billboard to assert the claim that gay people are “just like us,” that is, unthreatening and not particularly “different.” This campaign was, in Majka’s view, simply the transferal of heterosexual neo-liberal values associating rights with a productive, orderly, self-contained, restrained private life of long-

term monogamy (2009). Majka's critique extends Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's discussion of "the couple form," the over-determined, rigid, socially sanctioned manifestation of permissible public intimacy in neo-liberalism (1998). The only way for a non-heteronormative practice to come into visibility is via heteronormative forms.

However, while the Campaign Against Homophobia (Kampania Przeciw Homofobii) is easily legible as a neo-liberal "normalizing" strategy for gay activism (see also Sikora and Majka 2021), attention to its specific approach to visibility can also be productively read as an attempt to enter Poland's core nation. This is in no way to say that the Campaign is nationalist or uses a nationalizing frame. The Campaign and its leaders are staunchly pro-European Union, pro-gender equality, and support progressive policies for all. Yet their appeals reproduce the dynamic, revealed by the trans theories referenced above, in which their assigned "difference" is taken up and claimed, only to function as a gateway to full humanity controlled by those speaking for the national core group. Their specific visual language manifests this positionality.

One of its most circulated videos marketing its cause, "I am LGBT—I am a person," presents the Campaign's approach (Kampania 2020). The high quality, visually appealing video presents a series of individuals in a rapid series of head shots looking straight at the camera. Piano music is in the background. A voiceover is heard: "I am LGBT. I am a person." [Jestem LGBT—jestem człowiekiem.] After the first few individuals, who each appear to be under thirty and dressed informally, the head shots are presented more rapidly, and the music's rhythm also quickens. Interspersed with young people is a male who is wearing a white lab coat with a stethoscope around his neck; a few shots later we see a man who appears to be on a public bus and appears to be in his thirties; and later middle-aged and elderly individuals appear, interspersed among the many in their twenties and younger. The voiceover phrase is repeated, and then repeated again with many voices in harmony. A few seconds later one of the shots is of a woman holding a sign: "I am not an ideology." The phrase, *jestem LGBT, jestem człowiekiem*, is repeated more frequently, with voices overlapping to extend the sense of the many. The two-and-a-half minute clip ends with the words on the screen, "2 million LGBT people live in Poland," then in the next frame, "LGBT people are lesbians, gays, bisexual people and transgender [transpłciowe]. They are people!" Then: "Say no to homophobia and transphobia in Poland."

This approach can be seen as countering the Law and Justice frame that there are no gay people in Poland, only an "ideology" that spreads the idea that gay people are "normal." As noted earlier in the paper, Law and Justice frequently uses the formula that there are "normal" people, a category that excludes gay life in any form. The Campaign Against Homophobia video mirrors back the Law and Justice strategy but reverses the terms; it presents proof, if you will, that gay people are indeed "normal." The repetitive head shots at first can be interpreted to be an effective counterstatement. The video does indeed showcase many different kinds of Polish people who say that they are gay. But the rapid fire switch from person to person, the direct stare at the camera, and most importantly, the claim that "I am a person," also have another effect: to reinforce the reality that there is a large public who does not accept this claim. The video choreographs the gay voice as making a request, from a position outside of personhood. And there must be an authority to whom the request is being made. This activism stays inside the discursive regime in which belonging is conditional.

Conclusion: Queer Persons and Politics in Poland

Trans theories are not new to Poland. There are many writers, activists and people in the public sphere who work with conceptualizations of politics which promise liberation rather than inclusion. Examples include the journal *InterAlia*, which has been publishing since 2006 and has an active social media presence (*InterAlia* 2021); the Trans-Fuzja Foundation, a community-based support, advocacy and outreach group in Warsaw, funded by international foundations (Trans-Fuzja 2021); the student groups at universities such as Queer UW at the University of Warsaw (Grabania 2021). Trans people in Poland face a degree of physical violence, abandonment, emotional abuse and lack of protection by law enforcement that cannot be overstated. These organizations are crucial in creating some kind of connection with others and sharing of resources. The need for them is amplified by the reluctance of non-trans gay activists to embrace trans experiences and vulnerabilities as part of either campaign or general visibility. At the same time, a range of queer, trans and non-gender conforming groups do partner with gay, lesbian and bisexual organizations (Baer 2020).

In Poland a concept of “queer” circulates among and within gay communities, cultures and subcultures, referring to a radical questioning of the “entire normative system,” according to Majka (2009: 12). It calls for participation in social relations, community, intimacy—in gay life—without reference to any categorization of sexual or gender identity. The queer journal *InterAlia* uses the terms “odmieńcze” or “odmieńczość” to mean queer; the root here is “to turn,” *mienic*, but “odmienic” refers to the process of a person turning into something else, as in folk tales, and “odmieńcze” might be translated as a misfit or outcast. This corresponds with English uses of “queer” as describing an eccentric. Here the individual carries the queerness; in doing so, it cannot function as a critique of a “normative system.” It is rather a refuge from the disciplinary procedures of heteronormative intimacies. It seems as if theorizing from other contexts and other lives—Black trans lives-- may provide pathways around the power of the Nation.

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